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Hulme, Moira ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4095-3880>,
Beauchamp, Gary, Clarke, Linda and Hamilton, Lorna (2023) Collaboration
in times of crisis: leading UK schools in the early stages of a pandemic.
Leadership and Policy in Schools, 22 (1). pp. 161-180. ISSN 1570-0763

Downloaded from: <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/627489/>

Version: Published Version

Publisher: Taylor & Francis (Routledge)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2021.1917623>

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To cite this article: Moira Hulme, Gary Beauchamp, Linda Clarke & Lorna Hamilton (2021): Collaboration in Times of Crisis: Leading UK Schools in the Early Stages of a Pandemic, Leadership and Policy in Schools, DOI: [10.1080/15700763.2021.1917623](https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2021.1917623)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2021.1917623>



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Published online: 28 Apr 2021.



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Collaboration in Times of Crisis: Leading UK Schools in the Early Stages of a Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the political and relational dimensions of leading and managing schools in the early stages of pandemic-induced school closure in the four nations of the United Kingdom. It draws on in-depth interviews with 12 headteachers from primary, secondary and special schools. Headteachers used adaptive leadership strategies, including bridging, brokering and buffering, to recalibrate provision at pace. School closures demanded enhanced levels of coordination and communication around what mattered most. However, despite exercising creative agency, headteachers spoke of “clipped wings”, with some feeling “vulnerable” or “alone” in attempting to mitigate often unknown risks amid constantly shifting guidance.

Introduction

While educational leadership is replete with studies of change management, before 2020 few studies combined school-level educational leadership and crisis management, and fewer still connected school and system leadership and transboundary global crises. Pre-Covid the field of crisis management in education typically addressed sudden impact crisis events, such as school violence and natural disasters. Consequently, much of the extant literature assumes relatively clearly defined beginning and endings expressed in four conventional phases of crisis management: mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery. The profound impact of the Covid pandemic is redirecting attention from crises as unexpected single events to protracted slow burn “creeping crises” that are also “compound crises”, the multiple effects of which are experienced by the most vulnerable in successive inter-linked waves (Boin et al., 2020; Mascio et al., 2020). In this article, pandemic-induced school closures are approached as constituent of high magnitude compound crises. As education settings reopen, the scale and complexity of the inequities amplified by the Covid pandemic demand that the emergency “reflex” of 2020 is followed by a sustained deliberative “response” (Biesta, 2020, p. 30). This re-conceptualization of crises brings new layers of complexity for school leaders, decision makers and policy analysts engaged in reimagining education futures for a post-Covid world.

This article examines the political and relational dimensions of leading and managing schools in the early stages of pandemic-induced school closure. Drawing on in-depth qualitative interviews with twelve school leaders in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the paper examines collaboration with external stakeholders during the first UK lockdown of March to June 2020. Four dimensions of adaptive leadership are used to explore how school leaders “crafted coherence” (Honig & Hatch, 2004) at a time of deep uncertainty: *agentic* (local decision making), *collaborative* (external relationships), *emotional* (ethos of care) and *relational* (collegial). The analysis highlights the

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strategic agency of headteachers who occupy a critical position at the nexus of policy for schools and service delivery. The study explored how headteachers made sense of and operationalized the rapid transition to in-school and in-home learning after school closure. This article reports how headteachers acted as mediators of external messages, negotiated temporary arrangements with partner agencies and brokered information and outcomes for teachers, school students and their families at the peak of the first wave of the UK coronavirus pandemic in spring 2020. Deliberation on how to recalibrate provision is presented along three axes: (i) between schools and allied services of health and children's social care; (ii) between schools and middle tier structures for school governance; and (iii) between schools and central government and national education agencies. Despite the small number of cases examined, the study is significant in highlighting the interaction between education and social policy, and interdependencies within the public sector in decentralized contexts. While drawing on empirical sources from the UK at a particular point of time, "methodological nationalism" (Beck, 2006) is rejected. The themes of leader autonomy, responsibility and moral agency have relevance beyond the national scale.

On 31 December 2019, the Chinese government announced an unidentified cause of a pneumonia outbreak in Wuhan. The first cases of corona virus disease in Europe were reported in France on 24 January 2020. By April 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic had led to temporary countrywide or regional school closures in over 190 countries, affecting 1.6 billion learners, over 91% of the world's student population (UNESCO, 2020, p. 5). As the pandemic swept across Europe, national school systems moved from partial to full closure to reduce the transmission of the virus. Italy was the first European country to close schools from 5 March, with most other European school systems closing by 16 March. Only Sweden and Iceland elected to retain partial closure. On 23 March 2020 the UK was the last European country to close schools, affecting 10 million children and young people.

As a decentralized unitary state, responsibility for schools in the UK lies with the Department for Education (DfE) in England and the equivalent departments within the devolved administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Across the UK and internationally, reforms have sought to increase autonomy for schools and school leaders alongside greater public accountability (Department for Education [DfE], 2016; OECD, 2014, 2017; Scottish Government, 2017; World Bank Group, 2016). An espoused commitment to school level autonomy has accompanied increased central control through outcomes-driven accountability systems. As a result, schools leaders navigate a complex policy mix, reconciling tensions between local responsiveness and prescriptive pedagogy, children's inclusion and wellbeing and comparative school performance measures, school-to-school collaboration and competitive funding streams. For school leaders such conditional autonomy entails processes of empowerment and responsabilisation. Increased responsibility, articulated as autonomy, has intensified headteacher workloads and the "riskiness" of headship (Thompson et al., 2020; Thomson, 2009). Recruiting and retaining headteachers has become increasingly challenging in Scotland (Forde & Lowden, 2015), Wales (Davies et al., 2018) and England (Lynch et al., 2017).

While acknowledging transnational policy influence, devolution in the UK has generated varying degrees of policy divergence. In Scotland and Wales there is a commitment to publicly funded comprehensive education, a stronger sense of professional agency and national education purpose, and (historically) a popular belief in a more consensual approach to policy formation. In contrast, the schools landscape is more fragmented and less coherent due to three decades of marketization, privatization and diminished local authority control in England, and longstanding political and social divisions in Northern Ireland (Ball, 2007; Beauchamp et al., 2015; Woods et al., 2020). Across the four education systems, the politicization of schools policy and the influence of reform minded Ministers has created an unstable policy environment characterized by constant change.

The Coronavirus Act 2020 gave additional emergency powers to Ministers in the devolved administrations to slow the transmission of the virus. In the early stages of crisis management, the four devolved governments coordinated their response with differences in timing rather than substance. As restrictions were lifted at different times and to varying extents in each country, plans for reopening schools were influenced by local governance arrangements, specifically the relative influence and

power of stakeholders – local authorities/multi-school Trusts, boards of governors, professional organizations, and teacher unions. In Wales and Scotland, local authorities are significant regional structures that are more involved in education decision making than local authorities in England. Since 2010, there has been a rapid growth in Multi-Academy Trusts (MAT) in England i.e. networks of publicly funded but independent schools (academies) with a MAT Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and Board of Directors (Crawford et al., 2020; Eddy-Spicer et al., 2019). The growth of Multi-Academy Trusts has produced a “system of small systems” (Whitty, 2014, p. 472), giving rise to a variety of “branded” or “local professionalisms” (Whitty, 2014, p. 471). The middle tier in Northern Ireland is complex. In 2015, five Education and Library Boards were replaced with a single Education Authority that holds responsibility for primary and secondary education and youth services, alongside the Catholic Council for Maintained Schools and Controlled Schools Support Council (Woods et al., 2020).

This article is structured in five sections. The first section provides the contextual background to this exploratory study, that is, the disruptive effects of forced school closures in the UK. The second section outlines the conceptual framework, aims and guiding questions. The third section explains how the empirical work was undertaken, including ethical and methodological considerations of conducting qualitative research at a time of crisis. The fourth section uses a multilevel governance approach to consider scope for headteacher agency in relations between social care, governance and government. The fifth section revisits the literature and draws together key insights and implications as the education sectors within the four UK jurisdictions moved from initial crisis response in March to June 2020 to contend with further local lockdowns in November 2020, and a UK wide lockdown from January to March 2021.

Research context

In response to the first wave of the pandemic, schools across the UK were only open to priority groups from 23 March 2020. Priority groups included the children of critical workers (for example, frontline health and social care staff) and more vulnerable children (broadly defined as those with a social worker, in out-of-home care, young carers, and those with support needs or family circumstances that presented challenges for the child or young person). In addition, Education Ministers paused all but essential data collection requests from schools until September 2020. In March, routine school inspections were suspended in each of the four UK school systems. In April, all national assessments and examinations were canceled and replaced by teacher assessment (calculated grades submitted by schools) completed by the end of May 2020. Drawing on public health advice, the timeline for restarting in-school learning varied between jurisdictions, was subject to within-country retractions in light of developing understandings of logistics, parental concerns, and upwards pressure from professional associations and local authorities.

The UK Prime Minister announced on May 28 that in-school learning would resume in England from 1 June 2020 for some primary school pupils (pupils aged 3–5 years (nursery and reception), aged 5–6 (Year 1) and aged 10–11 (Year 6)). Some secondary school pupils returned from 15 June for face-to-face support from their teachers (pupils aged 14–15 (Year 10) and pupils aged 16–17 (Year 12)), ahead of full re-opening in September. The scale of summer term reopening reduced as the constraints of staffing, space and physical distancing became apparent. Only 17% of pupils, just over 1.6 million, were attending publicly funded schools in England in July 2020 (DfE, 2020). In Wales, proposals for blended in-school and in-home learning from 29 June were reduced to in-school contact for “check-in, catch up and prepare” (Welsh Government, 2020a), contingent on local authority direction. Forty-three per cent of pupils in Wales attended at least one session in the last week of the summer term, 13–17 July (Welsh Government, 2020b). Scotland and Northern Ireland focused on a return to in-school learning after the summer break. The Scottish Government announced a full return from August 18, 2020, overturning an earlier plan for blended learning. The Northern Irish Executive announced a phased return from August 24 with all pupils attending from September.

Across the UK, as elsewhere, the closure of nearly all school buildings gave rise to waves of disruption, a sudden and enduring sense of “loss” (Maitland, 2020) and constant processes of adaptation among the school workforce (Kim & Asbury, 2020). This included loss of physical presence in the school community and sustained interaction with school students, coworkers and parents; loss of external validation from reference points in established accountability systems and disruption to the assessment calendar; and loss of internal validation through day-to-day co-present team working, combined with the challenges of maintaining an occupational identity alongside home schooling and caring responsibilities. As schools quickly transitioned to online education, teachers needed to become adept in the pedagogical use of communications software (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams) and online teaching and learning tools (e.g., SeeSaw, Google classroom). In unprecedented and unpredictable times, school leaders responded under relentless pressure (Harris, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020). Leadership teams worked on equity-driven audits of access to computers, broadband provision and wireless networking (wifi), and mobilized the distribution of student work packs (hard copies) and food vouchers or food parcels for students eligible for benefits-related free school meals. As the situation evolved leadership teams engaged in iterative cycles of scenario planning for re-opening, grappling with the logistics of a revised curriculum offer, reduced instruction time, the operational challenges of physical distancing and reduced interaction in protective bubbles, enhanced hygiene practices, workforce planning, staggered starts to the school day, managing parent congregations at drop-off/collection and organizing school transport. All provision remained subject to extensive risk assessment, including the possible reintroduction of restrictions in response to subsequent local coronavirus flare-ups.

Throughout periods of school closure, school leaders retained responsibility for educational equity, and teacher and pupil wellbeing, including safeguarding (Pearce & Miller, 2020). The pandemic increased existing vulnerabilities and generated new ones (Driscoll et al., 2020). To mitigate the impact of the pandemic on wellbeing and education, the normative and operational imperative for effective collaboration among public sector professionals escalated. Professional collaboration in multi-agency partnership work is an increasing feature of the work of publicly funded schools in the UK and internationally. Close multi-agency working has been promoted between education, health and social work to tackle the persistent challenges of poverty-related educational inequity (Education Authority (Northern Ireland), 2018; Estyn, 2020; Social Mobility Commission, 2019). Prior to Covid-19, the impact of social disadvantage on wellbeing featured prominently within legislative and policy contexts across the UK (Children and Young People (Scotland) Act, 2014; Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, 2015; What Works Centre for Wellbeing, 2020). For example, interagency collaboration is evident in person-centered, place-based initiatives (Dyson et al., 2014; Gilbert, 2017) such as the “nurturing city” in Glasgow, Scotland (March & Kearney, 2017, p. 237), the Full Service Extended Schools and Community Network programmes in Belfast, Northern Ireland, the introduction of Regional Improvement Collaboratives and Children’s Neighborhoods in Scotland and designated Opportunity Areas and Children’s Zones in England (Chapman, 2019; Easton et al., 2018). Additional funding is targeted at closing the opportunity gap between disadvantaged students and their more advantaged peers across the UK including the Pupil Premium (England and Northern Ireland), the Pupil Deprivation/Development grant (Wales), the Pupil Equity Fund (Scotland) and Attainment Scotland Fund. Schools are increasingly sites for the co-location of services to families and communities such as food banks, guidance and counseling services (Public Policy Institute for Wales, 2019). It is estimated that UK school closures during the pandemic may reverse a decade of progress in closing a persistent poverty-related attainment gap, potentially posing additional challenges for future social mobility in a post-Brexit Britain (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020; Education Endowment Foundation [EEF], 2020; Eyles et al., 2020).

Framework

The education policy environment produces a barrage of reform (outside-in) with which leaders and teaching teams engage constantly. Leaders are boundary spanners (Scott, 1998), who routinely

navigate structural and social hierarchies between elected officials, civil servants, practitioners, and the wider school community. Spillane and Anderson (2014) describe headship as “a multifaceted job that spans instructional, managerial, and political realms” (p. 2). With the increasing complexity of “networked leadership” (Diaz-Gibson et al., 2017, p. 1041), the school principal is both organizational leader and participant within a complex web of formal and informal inter-school and multi-agency partnerships of varied duration, with different structures, professional cultures, and accountabilities e.g., children’s social care, community police, health, education psychology, and youth services, and third sector organizations. In pressured times, internal tensions and contradictions come to the fore, as educators embrace, accommodate or resist changes to work practices (Ball et al., 2011). Headship is thus demanding relational and emotional labor (Crawford, 2009; Crow et al., 2017; Thomson, 2020). Kelchtermans et al. (2011) use the metaphor of the lonely “gatekeeper” to convey the “vulnerability and emotionality” of the leader’s role (p. 93). The demands of the 24-hour online world place additional pressure on “connected professionals” (Pollock & Hauseman, 2019, p. 382) to respond within shorter timescales, intensifying workloads and extending working hours.

To understand the leadership challenges during the pandemic, this paper draws on sense making theory, and adopts an ambiguity-centered approach to adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 1994). Sense making is a process of constructing meaning to a new reality and taking action (Weick, 2009). Sense making involves “inventing” or “authoring” (Weick, 1995, p. 8). Meanings are constructed with recourse to prior knowledge, values and beliefs, school norms and culture (Spillane & Anderson, 2014). Sense making helps headteachers translate external demands into contextualized school practices (Braun et al., 2010). At times of crisis, leaders constantly reconstruct their understanding of rapidly changing situations. Framing and re-framing is integral to this process (Park et al., 2012; Woulfin et al., 2016). Multiple actors are involved in the dynamic framing process – national government, local government, education agencies, children’s services and allied health professions, news media, professional associations and parent and community groups. At times of deep uncertainty, school leaders occupy a key mediating-moderating role enabling transition and adaptation to change, while defending valued local practices from external incursion. They are important brokers, orchestrating bridging (linking between organizations to facilitate desired change), while also buffering to mitigate encroachment of jurisdictional boundaries (Kim & Kim, 2016), and filtering out elements that challenge coherence (Asada et al., 2020; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Ganon-Shilon et al., 2020).

In examining the scope for leader autonomy and agency at times of crisis, we revisit relations of accountability in shifting modes of school governance. In England, the schools’ quality inspectorate notes the contraction of decision-making capacity of headteachers within the new freedoms obtained by self-managing Multi-Academy Trusts (Ofsted, 2019). Critical scholars have described headteachers’ experiences of academisation in England as “indentured autonomy” (Thompson et al., 2020, p. 1) and the persistence of strong regulatory control from MAT Executives and central government agencies as “coercive autonomy” (Greany & Higham, 2018, p. 16). In Scotland, Forde and Torrance (2020) suggest the Scottish National Party government is “increasingly directive, centralized and target setting” (p. 5) as it works to narrow a highly politicized opportunity gap. Increased competition by comparison has eroded incentives for school-to-school collaboration in Wales (Reynolds & McKimm, 2020) and Northern Ireland (Woods et al., 2020). Thus, while policy language extols professional collaboration and leader autonomy, vertical levers remain strong.

This exploratory study examines how school leaders/principals (referred to as headteachers in the UK) actively engaged in “crafting coherence” (Honig & Hatch, 2004) during school closures between March and June 2020. It was undertaken to explore processes of “translation” and “elaboration” (Braun et al., 2010, p. 549), to provide an insight into the spaces for maneuver and constraints influencing local choices. It offers a power-sensitive examination of the dynamic processes of framing and sense making during lockdown. The following questions guided the inquiry: How do school leaders negotiate external relationships to adapt provision at a time of crisis? What are the enablers and constraints influencing local choices and action?

Methods

Qualitative inquiry is particularly suited to explorations of how individuals make meaning and respond to crises as they rapidly evolve (Teti et al., 2020). However, doing qualitative research in education during a pandemic raises ethical concerns and methodological challenges. Fieldwork researchers need to exercise “ethical reflexivity” (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2006, p. 141) and appreciate the demands placed on key workers at a time of crisis management. The research protocol was approved via university institutional ethical review procedures, which include consideration of potential adverse reactions and the development of distress protocols. The design was informed by the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2018; SERA, 2005). Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants following a written and verbal briefing on objectives, purpose and intended use of data.

Sixteen headteachers were approached to participate in a remote interview to share their experiences of school leadership during lockdown, including key factors that supported or impeded positive local action; 12 accepted (See Table 1 Headteacher characteristics and school context). Prospective participants were identified through school–university partnership activity and recruited using non-probabilistic convenience sampling. While acknowledging the risks of selection and volunteer bias, this approach was appropriate for the first stage of a time sensitive exploratory enquiry with no available secondary data sources (Rivera, 2019). In addition, voluntariness is an important consideration in qualitative research on sensitive topics in pressured times (Graham et al., 2007).

Telephone or online video interviews of between 45 and 60 min duration were conducted between May 21 and June 26, 2020 with headteachers of primary (4), post-primary/secondary (4) and special schools/alternative provision (4) including a Pupil Referral Unit for young people with social, emotional and behavioral difficulties. The sample includes headteachers with a range of experience, employed in different sectors, and school settings (locality, intake demographic, size). All the schools had a positive support rating from their respective national inspectorate. Although remote interviews were unavoidable due to social distancing mandates, an emerging body of research indicates that this approach compares favorably with in-person interviews in terms of disclosure and rapport (Hanna & Mwale, 2017; Jenner & Myers, 2019; Lobe et al., 2020; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019). The semi-structured interview guide was generated collaboratively and piloted with a headteacher not included in the sample to assess the time required, question order and clarity. The topic guide included school context, previous history of collaboration, the negotiation of networks (internal and external) at a time of crisis, and the dynamics of lateral and hierarchical communication in managing risks. Care was taken to allow sufficient time and space for participants to reflect and verbalize their thoughts by sharing the questions in advance with the headteachers.

This small-scale study includes participants from the four national school systems of the UK, but it is not intended as a comparative study in the traditional sense. Instead, the inclusion of schools in different school systems in a linked welfare regime sharpens the focus on governance and the potential affordances of devolution, especially differences in the middle tier of education governance (e.g., local authorities, multi-academy trusts or regional consortia). The purpose of this exploratory study was to provide initial insights rather than to generalize to a larger population.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded using both descriptive and interpretative codes (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018; Miles et al., 2014). A process of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was completed using multiple coding steps in an iterative and reflexive process. First, line-by-line annotation and open coding of a single shared transcript generated a provisional coding frame. A team meeting and initial coding of a set of within-country transcripts followed this. A coding frame of a priori codes (King, 2004) supplemented with emergent codes was generated by moving iteratively between the data and four dimensions of adaptive leadership in the context of ambiguity: *agentic* (local decision making), *collaborative* (external relationships), *emotional* (ethos of care) and *relational* (collegial). Repeated cross-case analysis with the revised coding frame was completed across the dataset. Attention was directed to emerging patterns as well as points of divergence and outliers.

Table 1. Headteacher characteristics and school context.

Gender	Length of experience as headteacher (Years)	Length of tenure at current school (Years)	School sector	Number of pupils	Age range (years)	Locality	Pupils Eligible for Free School Meals (%)	Pupils with English as an Additional Language (%)	Most recent school support rating (national inspectorate)	Country
Male	1	18	Secondary	1,450	11-18	Small town	34%	5%	Outstanding (Ofsted)	England
Female	5	5	Secondary	1,050	11-18	Urban	55%	32%	Good (Ofsted)	England
Male	15	6	Secondary	854	12-18	Urban	<10%	<10%	Good (HMI)	Scotland
Female	8	4	Secondary	788	11-18	Urban	5%	<5%	Very Good (ETI)	Northern Ireland
Female	10	3	Primary	479	5-11	Urban	23%	55%	Good (Estyn)	Wales
Female	10	10	Primary	458	3-11	Small town	<10%	<10%	Very good (HMI)	Scotland
Female	10	16	Primary	346	5-11	Urban	48%	<5%	Good (ETI)	Northern Ireland
Male	2	2	Special	282	5-18	Urban	70%	<5%	Very Good (ETI)	Northern Ireland
Male	18	11	Special	259	4-16	Small town	unavailable	unavailable	Good (Estyn)	Wales
Female	4	4	Primary	231	3-11	Small town	14%	<1%	Good (Ofsted)	England
Female	22	22	Pupil Referral Unit	40	11-16	Urban	50%	unavailable	Outstanding (Ofsted)	England
Female	2	2	Special	28	10-21	Rural	unavailable	unavailable	Very good (Care Inspectorate)	Scotland

The analysis was supported by QSR-NVivo 11 software for qualitative data analysis. The NVivo project contained all audio and text transcripts, the coding framework, records of team meetings, diagramming of connections between themes, analytic memos and reflexive notes (Nowell et al., 2017). Coding for this article focused on the enablers and inhibitors of a coordinated response to the social-educational challenges presented by school closure.

The aim of this study was to explore how headteachers “crafted coherence” (Honig & Hatch, 2004) amid deep uncertainty and competing logics during the first lockdown in spring 2020. To understand the scope of headteacher agency, and how provision was rapidly adapted to accommodate diverse and multiple demands in ways that remained congruent with espoused priorities and purposes, the discussion is presented along three core axes. These are: (1) horizontal relationships between education and social care; (2) relationships between schools and the middle tier of school governance (local authorities, regional consortia in Wales, multi-academy trusts in England); and (3) relationships between schools and central government and their agencies (UK and devolved Governments, school inspectorates, national curriculum and assessment bodies).

Working together: schools, children’s services, the middle tier, and central government

Relationships between education and social care

All headteachers expressed an ethic of care as they worked to sustain strong relationships between school settings and the children’s social care system during the pandemic. With their teams, they negotiated shared responsibilities for children of concern during lockdown. Education and social care services shared a public responsibility to ensure there were “eyes on the child” while schools were closed. Particular concerns arose from family evictions, food poverty, the temporary movement of children away from home, tracking referrals, and attending to the needs of children and young people who fell below monitoring thresholds. Headteachers of five of the 12 schools described moving swiftly with community associations to distribute food parcels to low-income families in the first weeks of the pandemic, in addition to the weekly distribution of physical learning packs for pupils without adequate access to online learning. In some settings, deliberation arose between school staff and children’s services around which service team held responsibility and had the capacity for doorstep home visits. In the first weeks of lockdown, a headteacher with strong school-social work relations prior to Covid-19 described a renewed process of “finding our feet” as each partner mediated risks within finite human resources (Secondary headteacher, MAT 1). Another complained that, “my Pupil Support teams do social work’s job for them” (Secondary headteacher, Scotland). Several headteachers expressed frustration in the context of increased demand within reduced budgets, “Before this everyone was stretched because of funding. This has just exposed all those cracks” (Primary headteacher, England). All headteachers described interagency communication as ongoing but variable and, in general, responses were summarized as “inconsistent” (secondary headteacher, MAT 2). To mitigate reduced access to teachers, social workers and other youth services, schools adapted, including in one case creating a designated telephone hotline and weekly video calls, with confidential child protection trigger words for students to signal concern to the school pastoral care team.

Lockdown exposed differences in how safeguarding and child wellbeing were interpreted between sectors. For example, careful deliberation was required between services to enable some primary school children with specific needs to access appropriate outdoor care. A primary headteacher reported that social work practitioners emphasized the epidemiological risk of guided interaction outside the home in relation to infection. In contrast, educators emphasized the risk to mental health and emotional wellbeing of remaining inside. Two children with particular needs accessed support from registered Forest School providers in Scotland, providing child-centered learning in the natural environment. Headteachers brokered bespoke local agreements for child wellbeing and family respite within cultures of risk management and blame displacement. For instance,

One child's anxiety has been so high that his level of physical and verbal abuse towards his family heightened. We put a plan in place to have him in the outdoors, supported by Additional Support for Learning staff. Social work said I had to ask the family if they were aware of the increased risks for their child of being in the outdoors as opposed to at home during lockdown. That was really hard for a family struggling. That had to be in writing. That was really challenging (Primary headteacher, Scotland).

Similarly, online video connections were viewed as both a resource and risk. The pedagogical use of synchronous digital video was not consistently supported by external stakeholders. For example, a pastoral team at a special school in Northern Ireland was keen to use Zoom video communications for remote face-to-face communication with students, but was over-ruled by the child protection team at Children and Young People's services. The Education Authority offered an alternative platform for collaboration, which the school pastoral team did not regard as fit for purpose. The headteacher argued that deliberation on e-safety did not consider the needs of special education stating that,

Our voice does not seem to be heard. It is a constant battle because our children find it difficult to socialize and an awful lot of their socialization actually takes place online (Special school headteacher, Northern Ireland).

In contrast, in Wales school leaders received prompt and reassuring guidance from the "Hwb" team (the national digital platform for learning and teaching in Wales, <https://hwb.gov.wales/>), identifying issues, but not ruling against appropriate use of Zoom by education professionals. A special school headteacher in Wales acknowledged that, "There are some issues around you being in their home and them being in yours, but we felt it was more concerning if we couldn't see the kids".

Conditions for school re-opening were a major source of contention (before programmes of mass Covid testing (from November 2020) and vaccinations (from December 2020) were available in the UK). This was especially apparent in special education and alternative provision where teacher-pupil ratios are higher, social distancing can be difficult, and personal protective equipment was limited. In Northern Ireland statutory duties for pupils with special educational needs were temporarily modified to "a best endeavours duty" if full duties could not be met due to reduced availability of staff and reallocation of resources to meet other essential services including planning for recovery and the restarting of education in August 2020 (Department of Education, Northern Ireland, 7 May 2020). Nevertheless, a headteacher in Northern Ireland described "massive pressure" from Stormont/central government and children's services to re-open for all vulnerable children, asserting that,

Nurses have been redeployed. Occupational therapists have been redeployed. Speech and language therapists have been redeployed. Yet it is these children who are the most vulnerable that are required to be back in school. The wrap around support they normally receive isn't there. We have got social workers trying to tell us to open when we are arguing we know our children better. (Special school headteacher, Northern Ireland)

Decentralization and local accountability helped school leaders to mediate external pressure. In responding to sustained pressure to accelerate the re-opening process, school governing bodies were mobilized to defend school-level decision making. For example, one headteacher stated that,

Governors have made the decision that there is an individual risk assessment for each child who applies to come back. If the risk is able to be managed then the child will be able to come back into school. If that risk can't be managed then that decision is resting with the Governors. (Special school headteacher, Northern Ireland)

Working with a middle tier in school governance

Partnership relations within the schools' sector were tested during the crisis, which exposed a lack of coordination and limited flexibility around activity associated with accountability. Although data demands from central government partially abated, the middle tier tightened sub-national/local

systems for monitoring, reporting and standardization. For example, a headteacher within a multi-academy trust (MAT) in England expressed frustration at frequent data requests from the Trust central office for information that had already been gathered and used internally. This large urban high school had developed a system for reviewing and recording the welfare and engagement in home learning of every child in the school each week. The Trust requested additional records, using a different system that duplicated effort already expended. Procedures and proforma for risk assessment and safeguarding, and templates for re-opening plans, required reconfiguration so that all plans across the Trust looked the same. As a result senior managers in school spent many hours reformatting data for reporting purposes that did not connect, in their view, with service enhancement or improvement.

Similarly, a headteacher of a special school in Wales was critical of the additional data requests that flowed from the regional school improvement consortia. There are 22 local authorities in Wales divided into four regional school improvement consortia. Data requests included the number of contacts between the school and individual children in a given period. The rationale for counting the frequency of contact, but not the mode, focus or quality of the contact, was not apparent. While the regional consortia maintained weekly telephone contact via designated Challenge Advisors, headteachers experienced this as a routine check-in, rather than a source of challenge or support. One Scottish headteacher also suggested that uncertainty had caused local authority officials to revert to “top-downism”, claiming that,

We are told that it can't be a one-size-fits-all model because we're all different; then the council goes into control mode and tries to consider a model that would fit all schools. The elected members won't have this, so it's back to square one. We've wasted two weeks trying to model timetables in a vacuum. The more the center contracts, the more controlling it tries to be, and therefore the more ineffective it is. (Secondary headteacher, Scotland)

The response to the pandemic brought to the fore tensions between the middle tier and school-level decision making. Decision-making authority ultimately rested with senior officials within local authorities or MATs, rather than headteachers. One example was a loss of control over staffing that inhibited planning for re-opening. A headteacher within a MAT was instructed not to advertise promoted posts, but to absorb senior staff from a “sister school” within the MAT that was facing a redundancy situation due to a falling roll and poor public profile. Externally imposed restrictions on staffing prevented the flexible deployment of resources to address emergent needs, and limited the ability of the headteacher to incentivize and reward staff for leading key areas of activity during the pandemic. The headteacher stated that,

I don't think the staff coming to us - who are very expensive and we're going to have to swallow the cost of that - are as good as our staff here, who have been denied the opportunity to apply for these positions . . . It's that type of operation where I've just had to learn to push so far and then keep my mouth shut. (Secondary headteacher, MAT 2)

Similarly, a headteacher in Scotland reported that limited flexibility over budgetary decisions and staffing at school level left little room to maneuver when the Covid-19 crisis broke. Three schools within the sample of 12 cited budgetary issues as a constraining influence on adapting well. Emergent needs had to be addressed as income declined from letting school facilities for sports and cultural activities, after-school childcare and breakfast clubs. In some cases, this meant adding to a historic budget deficit or stalling deficit repayments. One Scottish headteacher had inherited a budget shortfall when taking up post. Consequently,

[...] we don't have the technology that we really should have. We have many students who don't have proper access to devices. So, we're £250,000 in debt, a depute [leader] short, a third depute was transferred without consultation with me. (Secondary headteacher, Scotland)

Relationship between schools, central government, and national agencies

In normal circumstances, headteachers are the master framers of school-level narratives. A key source of contention reported by headteachers in this sample was a loss of control over messaging by dependence on Government declarations. During the pandemic, senior managers in schools were placed in constant responsive mode, modeling and remodeling a wide range of scenarios while shielding staff from deep uncertainty. A secondary headteacher in Northern Ireland commented, “We are constantly reinventing how school can run the next week”. The volume of guidance from the center – and the pace at which this was revised and replaced – placed great strain on headteachers, especially those in smaller schools with limited senior management support. For example,

Within one week, we had fifteen pieces of guidance to try and work out and communicate. The message keeps changing so I had a plan on Monday, it had to be altered on Tuesday, it had to be altered on Wednesday and that happened right the way through the week because the next piece of guidance contradicted something that had been said in the previous one. That’s where Heads are feeling stressed. (Primary headteacher, England)

The realities of working alongside the demands of 24-h news cycles presented further challenge. News saturation and the constantly shifting picture required hyper-vigilance and local guardedness. Headteachers were engaged in filtering messages from mainstream news outlets and social media to reassure teachers and parents. Headteachers felt they were placed below news outlets in Government communication chains, leading to feelings that,

The Minister seems to be chatting to the media quite a lot. Obviously there is a ministerial statement, but timed alongside that should come the letter to Principals in school, not the next day after the Minister has reported it on BBC Newline (Secondary headteacher, Northern Ireland)

As a result, headteachers could be caught on the back foot when responding to school staff and parents. For example,

One of the insults is that as a leader of a secondary school of 1,600 pupils you are finding things out from daily briefings in the Number 10 press conference before you’re being told about it and then having to read between the lines to think through the implications. (Secondary headteacher, England MAT 2)

Headteachers were the principal arbiters mediating messages from central government and charting a course of best fit between competing demands. For example, in Northern Ireland the Minister announced at a late stage in the 2019/2020 summer term that schools would still be required to provide annual reports on pupil progress to parents. Some staff were not confident that meaningful feedback on progress could be reported during the period of home learning, so a headteacher of a special school mediated expectations by limiting the reporting period to before March 13, 2020, the week before lockdown.

At the time of the interviews, school leaders reported a sense of professional exposure and isolation. They felt the full weight of protecting the health and wellbeing of teachers and children. This was especially acute in England where all schools were encouraged to re-open for some pupils in June 2020. As headteachers, they felt they were positioned in the firing line to be held accountable for adverse consequences arising from the local management of executive decisions made elsewhere. In the absence of consistent and timely evidence-informed guidance from the center, “it is all put back onto the Principal. It is under the Principal’s discretion” (Special school headteacher, Northern Ireland). Less experienced headteachers felt more exposed, reporting that,

I’ve felt more vulnerable and more alone through this than I ever have. You feel if something goes wrong, it’s you. There’s no backup . . . Last week there was something saying if you go back to work and you get the virus your headteacher is liable and you will be within your rights to sue. This is such a huge thing and we’re only dealing with that because we’ve been directed by the government to re-open. You feel as though you are just in a no-win situation. (Primary headteacher, England)

I have asked the questions at MAT level who's in front of the Health and Safety Executive in the future being held responsible and accountable for the death of a member of staff because our risk assessment wasn't robust enough or because I facilitated this? Who is accountable? (Secondary headteacher, England MAT 2)

Experienced headteachers were cynical about central endorsement of professional autonomy in times of crisis. The lack of guidance on the management of a phased return to school was regarded as unhelpful. Government recourse to discourses of professional discretion were regarded bluntly as “a get out” (Primary headteacher, Northern Ireland).

It suits the Department of Education to tell people they have autonomous headteachers who are creative innovative thinkers because they are not prepared to put anything on record other than advice about social distancing. The Minister's last comment was that we are not operating in draconian measures . . . My autonomy as a headteacher has been kind of paradoxical. I feel I have been given enough rope to hang myself at any given moment in time (Primary headteacher, Northern Ireland).

In combating isolation, peer-to-peer headteacher networks became important. These included informal closed group discussions (WhatsApp and e-mail), local school-to-school mandated and elective collaboration (e.g., school clusters/families of schools), as well as formal membership organizations, such as the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL).

Across this small sample of headteachers working in the different school systems of the UK, school leaders emphasized how they focused on what they could control while being aware of erosions to jurisdictional boundaries. They were simultaneously both authorized and disempowered. For example, Wales operated a hub school model for emergency childcare for the children of key workers and vulnerable pupils. Around 6,000 children and young people attended designated hub schools in Wales between March 23 and June 29, 2020. Hub school operations were managed at regional rather than school-level. Similarly, a primary headteacher in Northern Ireland described how restricting activity to the “practical” rather than the strategic had “clipped [her] wings”.

There's this paradox of being more in charge but less able to make the decisions. So, I can be more in charge of how I deliver, lead and manage but in terms of the big decisions they're not mine anymore: who is coming in, when they are coming in, what delivery of food there might be and how that might be shaped. I really don't want to open on Sunday for one child. I haven't got a choice in that, I have to do it. So, the system is a much more intrusive; [but] the internal autonomy is still quite strong. (Special school headteacher, Wales)

The alleviation of inspection pressure, and opportunities for policy deliberation beyond school, were positive aspects of revised external relations. Headteachers welcomed temporary respite from national school inspections and a changed relationship with the inspectorate. A headteacher of an English high school graded as Outstanding by the school inspectorate, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), described not having the pressure of waiting for an Ofsted call as “a cloud lifting” (MAT2). A Secondary Headteacher in Northern Ireland reported, “I feel as if the ETI [Education and Training Inspectorate] are now supporting me rather than holding me to account”. The balance between internal and external accountability was temporarily recalibrated by the pause in the inspection cycle and the repositioning of inspectors in an advisory capacity. Headteachers reiterated core values when describing the rationale for local choices. Care was taken to ensure decisions were consistent with the “school ethos” and “vision” (Primary headteachers, Wales and England), and “exemplified and promoted what we value” (Primary headteacher, Scotland). For some, the disruption of the pandemic enabled a return to core values, to “hit the reset button” (Secondary headteacher, Northern Ireland) and “get back to what I'm really meant to do” (Special school headteacher, Scotland). In addition, coordinated responses connecting local education networks strengthened the voice and agency of some headteachers. For example, secondary headteachers in Northern Ireland and England described how membership of emergency working groups provided access to decision-making circles and new opportunities for tactical brokerage. A secondary headteacher in Northern Ireland commented, “These are people to me now rather than names on the bottom of letters . . . I have become more confident with external bodies.”

Limitations

This paper draws on in-depth interviews with headteachers. The sample does not include accounts from allied partner agencies (e.g., health and children’s services) or those in senior roles within the middle tier of school governance. Teachers’ perceptions of leadership and contribution to “leading upwards” are not included, nor are the views of parents. Extending a linked ecology, multiple perspective approach to the empirical work would strengthen the warrant of claims, but was beyond the time limitation within which the first stage of this work was completed. Moreover, there are ethical considerations in extending recruitment at a time of professional challenge for prospective participants. There are limitations to self-report, especially among volunteer samples. Throughout this study, we adopted an explicit reflexive stance. Interviewee accounts were approached with “circumspect care” (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012, p. 376), that is, an earnest attempt to represent the voice of headteachers (being caring) while being aware of the construction of leadership and remaining open to alternative interpretations (being circumspect).

Discussion and conclusion

The headteachers who participated in the first stage of this study engaged in a range of adaptive leadership strategies including bridging, brokering and buffering (Asada et al., 2020) to rapidly recalibrate provision following school closure. *Bridging* tactics included building, renewing and reinvigorating support networks among leader peers and with allied agencies. This included school-to-school networks that were previously under-valued and under-utilized as a consequence of increased competition between schools and outcomes-driven performance rankings, especially in England; and making optimal use of new opportunities to influence decision making in invited fora beyond school. *Brokering* tactics included the negotiation of common understandings, shared professional language and temporary agreements between allied agencies – child, youth, and family services, child and adolescent mental health services – to support more effective joint work. School leaders acted as boundary spanners working across multiple professional communities to support emergency measures, including cross-agency liaison on the appropriate use of outdoor learning and respite care, the risk assessment and pedagogic value of online video-conferencing, and safeguarding referrals to maintain “eyes on the child”. Ambiguity around respective roles, responsibilities, and capacity impeded collaborative action. Adaptive leadership involved toggling between organizational (single school) interest and collective interests. *Buffering* tactics included building local coalitions to resist challenges to jurisdiction, for example, with school governors or trustees and professional associations concerning school re-opening; and filtering the constant information flow for school staff and parents. Inter-organizational trust was undermined when key information was not exchanged in a timely manner.

The accounts presented above confirm that high levels of external regulation, alongside moves toward self-managing, self-improving schools present challenges of coordination around common purpose. Shared ownership of risk between agencies requires transparency over roles and clear communication, including the rationale for decisions. Effective communication is vital in building cohesion and coherence needed for successful crisis management (Jetten et al., 2020). In re-purposing schools for blended provision, the school leaders in this study returned to first principles, focusing on the core mission and values on which school culture was built and facilitating strong communication with external communities. As exposed and connected professionals, headteachers needed a strong “moral compass” (Mowat, 2019, p. 68) to guide collaboration to address social and educational inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic, and the “courage” not to be subverted by chaotic and disruptive circumstances (Drysdale & Gurr, 2017, p. 139). Making choices about which aspects to select for attention is an inherently “contingent, political act” (Van Hulst & Yanow, 2016, p. 99). Headteachers in this sample prioritized emotional and physical wellbeing (Wang et al., 2020), addressing pastoral as much as academic concerns arising from home confinement. Leadership teams struggled with the equity-related difficulties of providing fair access to digital devices and

wireless networking, and the distribution of resources from physical work packs to food parcels and meal vouchers.

From an optimistic reading, the first wave of the pandemic opened up a temporary space for stronger expressions of “welfarist” (Gewirtz, 2002), as opposed to “corporatized” (Courtney, 2017) forms of leadership. Attention to “public value” (audit of performance outcomes) in schooling was re-oriented explicitly to the “public good” (social, cultural and material wellbeing) (Thomson, 2020, p. 199). School closures demanded enhanced levels of coordination and communication around what mattered most. For some leaders, patterns of engagement girded by an audit culture ceded to more mutualistic ways of defining and managing shared difficulties. Priorities for education and social policy crystalized in the work of community-focused schools. In response to emergent local needs and with temporary respite from routine inspections and data reporting, school leaders in this study were able to focus on developing collective understandings and re-asserting internal accountability (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). For some, this was an opportunity to “hit the re-set button” and return to professional judgment, modeling ethical behavior and context responsive leadership (Harris, 2020). For 10-week greater expression of ethical and principled leadership displaced regimes of competitive comparison that can cultivate unethical behaviors, such as gaming, exclusions, and off-rolling poorly performing students to influence school performance outcomes (Rayner, 2017).

However, it is evident that high levels of notional empowerment were not perceived to be accompanied by commensurate high levels of professional trust in school leaders and teachers. The pandemic also gave rise to re-centralizing tendencies. In the accounts above, scope for crafted responses to local challenges appears limited and was bounded, to varying degrees, by multiple accountabilities. Despite seeking ways to exercise creative agency with external stakeholders, headteachers in this small sample spoke more often of “clipped wings”, limited discretion over the use of the school estate, severe constraints over budgetary and staffing decisions, and sometimes also over pedagogic decisions. In responding to the crisis, some leaders felt “vulnerable”, “alone”, over-managed and under-led, attempting to mitigate often unknown risks with diminished resources amid constantly shifting, ambiguous or absent guidance.¹

This study demonstrates the significance of the middle tier in new relations of networked governance (Chapman, 2019). Governance reviews have produced changes to meso-level structures. In the UK, collaborative activity is promoted through a range of network initiatives including regional school clusters (school-to-school support) in Wales, locality leadership networks in Northern Ireland (school-Education Authority linkage), cross-authority partnerships and Regional Improvement Collaboratives in Scotland, and multi-school trusts and teaching school hubs in England. As school systems endeavor to “build back better” networked professional collaboration may prove a valuable defense against further re-centralization and the over-responsibilisation and isolation of school leaders. However, the experiences of headteachers reported above, signal the potential for a revitalized middle tier to revert to top-down leadership that stifles local creativity and responsiveness at times of crisis.

This study was conducted in the two months that followed the first peak of the UK pandemic in late April 2020. As the 2020/21 school year progressed, relations between teachers’ associations, local authorities and central government in England and Wales became increasingly adversarial, escalating in legal action initiated by government, local authorities and teacher unions. A second spike in infection rates led to a tiered system of regional restrictions across the UK in November 2020 (including a 17-day “fire break” national lockdown in Wales). In December 2020 a new highly transmissible variant of the virus, novel SARS-COV-2 variant VOC 202012/0, was reported across the UK (Public Health England, 2020). Through December 2020 and January 2021, a series of public disputes played out between the Department for Education, Ofsted and the Children’s Commissioner allied on one side; and local authorities, school leaders and teacher unions on the other. Councils, elected Mayors and previously moderate headteacher associations (the National Association of Head Teachers, NAHT, and the Association of School and College Leaders, ASCL) expressed concern about

the timetable for school re-opening, the schedule for teacher vaccinations and the rapid introduction of school-based mass testing of school students using lateral flow tests (Department for Education/ Department of Health and Social Care [DfE/DHSC], 2021; National Education Union [NEU], 2020). Despite televised reassurances from the UK Prime Minister on Sunday January 3, the closure of schools to all pupils (apart from vulnerable children and the children of critical workers) was announced on Monday January 4, and lasted until March 2021, as a third jurisdiction-led lockdown was implemented across the UK to reduce transmission rates and protect the National Health Service.

As education systems move from emergency action to “recovery” this is a critical moment to re-think how far previous education and social policies remain fit for a post-Covid world. How might school leaders, administrators and decision makers adapt policy and practice to address evident need brought into sharper relief by the pandemic? To guide deliberation, Biesta (2020) advises the question is no longer “What shall we do?” . . . we are faced with a different question: ‘What is this asking from us?’ (p. 30). Approaching the impact of school closures as part of a complex and multi-layered compound crisis demands more than strategies to “catch up” using policy tools attuned to earlier goals. While school closures were a rapid onset crisis, the deeper social and educational crises exposed were much longer in development and will cast a long shadow far beyond school re-opening. Given the stark socio-economic gradient to adverse outcomes, to pivot back to previous modes of working hardly seems defensible. As Clark-Ginsberg and Petrun Sayers (2020) observe, “differences in impacts are not the result of a *disaster* or the *victims*, but rather inequitable *policies and institutions* that place those already at risk in perilous positions” (p.482, original emphasis).

Future directions will be influenced by policy trajectories prior to the crisis. In England, the pandemic has reinforced rather than reversed existing reform paths in education and children’s social care. The pandemic has not interrupted the outsourcing of services with limited (or no) public scrutiny, further fueling the growth of edu-business (Ball, 2007), particularly global education technology businesses. Significant funding was channeled to outside agencies without tender as part of the coronavirus pandemic response. For example, £4.3 million was awarded to Oak National Academy for the provision of online lessons, £234 million to the French-owned Edenred company for the distribution of e-vouchers to families in food poverty, and £350 million to approved providers within a National Tutoring Service for disadvantaged pupils (including Third Space Learning that pays remote tutors in Sri Lanka and India an average of £3 an hour (Weale, 2021)). Such central endeavors have not enhanced the local capacity of headteachers and the schools’ workforce in England to lead remote learning, respond quickly to emergent need, or mobilize sufficient resources to address cumulative learning loss. Outsourcing fragments service provision and creates additional boundaries within and between education and children’s services. Additional devolved resources, such as the corona catch-up premium (a one-off grant of £80 per pupil aged 5–16 years) are modest given the scale of learning loss and legacy of reduced funding. Between 2010 and 2020, spending per pupil fell by 11% in Northern Ireland, 8% in England, 6% in Wales (6%) and 2% in Scotland (Britton et al., 2019). Headteachers are held accountable for their catch up spend and are directed to centrally endorsed pedagogical strategies. An Education Recovery Commissioner, Sir Kevan Collins, former Chief Executive of the Education Endowment Foundation, was appointed in February 2021. Branded the “catch up tsar” by the media, this nine-month appointment substitutes for a more participatory national education commission. Temporary policy settlements to protect children’s education and wellbeing can be precarious as was exposed by the pro-economy relaxation of restrictions that escalated transmission rates forcing rolling school closures in the winter of 2020.

Moving forward, the experience of collaboration in times of crisis raises a number of significant challenges for educational leaders. Gardner-mctaggart (2020) argues that educational leadership as a field needs to re-orientate from a concern with efficiency, defined as success in test scores, to an explicit focus on “students’ futures” beyond the classroom (p. 4). Tackling learning loss is insufficient in protecting societal wellbeing from future compound crises. The rise of new nationalism and protectionism, fake news, widening socio-economic inequalities and a creeping environmental crisis

reinforce the need for global citizenship education and leadership for social justice. The value of cooperative, empathetic, and community-engaged action fostered during school closures may help educational leaders and their representatives, as policy actors, to work to remove barriers to participation in local and regional decision-making. In addressing the vulnerabilities exposed and heightened by the pandemic, principled leadership will require school leaders to sustain a strong professional voice in public debate on school education and children's wellbeing. Futures-oriented reflexive leaders might reject the persistence of deficit and reductive thinking that places responsibility for underachievement on underserved and marginalized communities (MacDonald, 2020). Educational change for equity requires a decisive shift from an ameliorative frame to a transformative frame if the "recovery" is to address rather than recreate social vulnerabilities.

Note

1. The international evidence base continues to develop on the role of older children in transmitting the virus, the risks for children and young people from a BAME background, the impact of interventions to enable return to school on different age groups, and the impact of physical distancing on children's social and emotional health and wellbeing (Welsh Government, 2020c).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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