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***The International Research Handbook on Leading in the Public Interest: Re-imagining  
Public Leadership in a post-pandemic paradigm?***

*Lorna Hamilton, Gary Beauchamp, Moira Hulme, Janet A Harvey and Linda Clarke*

**Part 1: Public Leadership as a new theoretical and conceptual framework for leading public services in the interests of the public**

**Chapter 6: Challenges for school leadership and management in the four nations of the United Kingdom during the pandemic: conceptual shifts and implications for future thinking**

**Abstract**

This chapter draws on research carried out during the pandemic into the responses of head teachers in diverse school and community contexts. A need for a deepening sense of shared identity with leaders binding people together and being seen “to stand with them” was needed [\[1\]](#) enabling a shared understanding of goals in moving forward together. In developing relationships across the school community (staff, pupils and parents), the importance of trust and fairness is highlighted, led by moral imperatives focused on the collective good of the community. A framework emerging from this work highlights dynamic elements as school leaders adapted and negotiated new ways of being part of the school imaginary while holding on to principles and values and a sense of leadership as an essential part of investment in education and education communities as vehicles for the common good.

Key words: shared identity- us-ness; school imaginary; collective good

**Introduction**

Public leadership exists in a policy environment that is constantly changing. School leaders are boundary spanners (Scott, 1998), navigating structural and social hierarchies between elected officials, civil servants, practitioners, and the wider school community.

Headship/principalship is “a multifaceted job that spans instructional, managerial, and political realms” (Spillane and Anderson, 2014, p.2). The school leader both leads their organisation(s) and participates within a complex web of formal and informal inter-school and multi-agency partnerships of varied duration, with different structures, professional cultures, and accountabilities, including children's social care, community police, health, educational psychology and youth services, and third sector organisations. Kelchterman *et al.* (2011, p.93) use the metaphor of the lonely “gatekeeper” to convey the “vulnerability and emotionality” of the leader's role. The demands of the 24-hour online world place additional pressure on “connected professionals” (Pollock and Hauseman, 2019, p.382) to respond within shorter timescales, intensifying workloads and extending working hours. These circumstances have been well researched in what we now tend to call “normal times”, but the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated need in a time of crisis and presented head teachers with both managerial and leadership challenges. Within this chapter we will highlight the perceived need to focus on leadership rather than managerial issues during this time.

The concept of crisis is broad and can be applied to a range of circumstances, however Sutherland (2017) advocated that crises embody four common characteristics: threat to a system; time pressure; an ill-structured situation; and a lack of adequate resources for response. Researchers also generally agree that crises are social phenomena, within which it is not disaster events themselves, but the impact on human systems, relationships and structures, that creates crises. All of these elements of crisis emerged in the research evidence discussed in this chapter. Our focus here is on public leadership during such a time of crisis, exploring a developing model illustrating the importance of a sense of the collective good and the moral and emotional dilemmas faced by school headteachers during this time.

The chapter is structured in six sections. First, in order to situate clearly our work on leadership in schools during a heightened crisis, we discuss some of the research carried out during the recent pandemic, and other relevant theoretical work. Second, we outline the data sources and methods used to gain insights into leadership practices in the early stages of pandemic-induced school closures in the United Kingdom (UK). Third, situated examples are used to illustrate the ways in which school leaders demonstrated adaptative expertise in sustaining education and welfare provision during school closures. Fourth, drawing on this empirical work, a model of school leadership in the early stages of the COVID-19 crisis is presented. As we move from the emergency response of 2020, through the recurring school

closures of 2021, and into deliberation on educational futures, the fifth section of the chapter considers the prospects for ethical public leadership within extant accountability structures. The chapter concludes by summarising key insights, particularly the value of empowering local actors through strong horizontal structures that foster distributed leadership.

### **School leadership research and the pandemic crisis**

Much of the research into school leadership in the time of Covid19 has scrutinised how leaders made sense of their circumstances. One of the largest of these empirical studies is the School Barometer research project (Huber and Helm, 2020). This surveyed 255 school leaders from across Germany, Switzerland and Austria as part of a larger survey project that included approximately 24,000 students, parents, educators, and system personnel. Relevant findings from this large study included that challenges were experienced by all actors in school contexts, that parents reported high levels of appreciation for the work of schools and teachers, and that learning with, through and about technology was important. Thornton's (2021) study of 18 principals from across New Zealand, found five leadership practices in response to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. These were: detecting signals and responding appropriately; demonstrating empathy and prioritising wellbeing; communicating frequently and effectively; leading collaboratively; and taking a community leadership role and taking opportunities to learn at all stages of the crisis. Data collected from 38 principals in Greece (Argyropoulou *et al.*, 2021) and 12 headteachers across the UK (Beauchamp *et al.*, 2020; Hulme *et al.*, 2021) explored the lived experiences of leadership whilst schools were physically closed and required to implement online teaching. Both studies found that school leaders reported challenges of immediacy in the ways they dealt with managerial and emotional problems. They also noted that their workloads were increased due to deficiencies in technological and infrastructure arrangements, and requirements for increased communication with their communities. Despite the diversity of all these contexts, leaders everywhere focused on managing urgent situations with attention to the learning and well-being needs of the stakeholders in their communities. However, going beyond coping strategies and change and crisis management, was something more profound happening?

Jetten *et al.* (2020) proposed the idea that, for schools to be successful in times of crisis sustained over a long period of time, commitment to a shared identity was required, and that this might be achieved through leaders bringing people together in a collective sense of community and belonging. Such a construct relies on shared understandings, mutual support

and moving forward together. Yet there are, additionally, nebulous but powerful qualities and values that need to be present in these circumstances, such as trust and fairness. It is argued (Haslam *et al.*, 2020) that it is through creating an imaginary, i.e., a coherent and cohesive sense of us-ness in pursuit of the collective good, that school leaders can empower their communities to focus on teaching, learning and well-being without the external pressures of inspection and heavy top-down commands.

Many layers of political and policy players during the pandemic were apparently authoritarian and looking for uniformity of response (Sahlberg, 2020). For others, the crisis led to a kind of freedom that allowed leaders to concentrate on building trust and ways of influencing the school community in positive ways rather than by enforcing compliance. For Haslam *et al.*, (2020) leadership was not necessarily something that belonged to the individual; instead, it was manifested in the relationships between leader and others as they sought the collective good.

Hargreaves and Fullan's (2012) conception of teachers' 'professional capital' emphasises the importance of human and social capital, emphasising care and morality and a critical contextual engagement with social justice. Such an approach foregrounds the personal and emotional engagement of school leaders in contributing to positive self-efficacy, teamwork and resilience, and on relationships with pupils, staff and parents in the school community. However, there may be concern over the difficulties faced by headteachers in trying to maintain the intensity of engagement, relationship building and emotional vulnerability faced in maintaining a cohesive community.

School leadership is complex work. Research shows that how principals make sense of, and act on, school related issues draw on their worldviews, beliefs about their communities, and understandings of teaching and learning (Spillane *et al.*, 2002; Anagnostopoulos and Rutledge, 2007; Longmuir, 2019; Reid, 2021). This supports Ribbins' (2007: 359) proposal that it is not sufficient to consider leadership conceptually: to understand what leading means requires "detailed and contextualised accounts of what individual leaders do and why they do it in a variety of specific circumstances, how and why others respond as they do, and with what outcomes".

The complexities of leadership were then added to with the arrival of the COVID pandemic. In the early days of this period, small-scale international studies began to emerge (e.g. Gurr

and Drysdale (2020), Huber and Helm (2020), Stone-Johnson and Miles Weiner (2020), Argyropoulou *et al.* (2021), Brion (2021), Brown *et al.* (2021), Longmuir (2021), Martinez *et al.* (2021), McLeod and Dulskey (2021) and Thornton (2021), which, taken collectively, are beginning to constitute a useful body of knowledge (Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier, 2013). Our own research focused on the four nations of the UK. It set out to provide detailed and individual leadership and management stories based on lived experiences during a pandemic and attempted to capture the key concepts and situational pressures in a tentative new model. In the light of the shifting sands of returning to schools, this model has continued to evolve to reflect returning narratives, to which we return later.

### **Methodological approach**

To understand the relational, processual and adaptive approach to 'leadership-as-practice' (Raelin, 2016), which school leaders might be using in response to a crisis such as the early stages of the UK Covid-19 pandemic, qualitative data were needed. Moreover, given that measures to reduce transmission of infection precluded direct observation of leadership in action (Raelin, 2020), methods of data collection had to be pragmatic.

Twelve headteachers were identified through school-university partnership activity and recruited using non-probabilistic convenience sampling. The sample was selected from each of the four countries of the UK, including primary (4), post-primary/secondary (4) and special/alternative provision (4) schools, also involving headteachers with diverse previous experience. We have addressed elsewhere (Beauchamp *et al.*, 2021; Hulme *et al.*, 2021) the risks of bias in the sampling, but the approach was appropriate to the circumstances. Inevitably the sample is small, but the purpose of the study was to acquire initial insights rather than to make generalisations. Telephone or online video interviews of 45 - 60 minutes duration were carried out during May and June 2020. As others have found (Hanna and Mwale, 2017; Jenner and Myers, 2019; Mirick and Wladkowski, 2019; Lobe *et al.*, 2020), this remote approach did not seem to inhibit disclosure by the headteachers and allowed rapport to be developed (Dodds and Hess, 2020).

The research design was informed by appropriate ethical guidelines for educational research (BERA, 2018; SERA, 2005) and internet-mediated research (British Psychological Society, 2017). Ethical concerns about researchers placing demands on key workers involved in crisis management were carefully addressed, including consideration of potential adverse

reactions and the development of distress protocols. The interview guide was approved via university ethical review procedures and piloted with a headteacher not subsequently involved in the study.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded using both descriptive and interpretative codes (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018; Miles *et al.*, 2014). Analysis involved multiple coding steps to produce a coding frame exploring four dimensions of leadership in the context of ambiguity: agentic (local decision making), collaborative (external relationships), emotional (ethos of care) and relational (collegial). Cross-case analysis with the coding frame was completed across the dataset using QSR-NVivo 11 software. Throughout the process, attention was directed to emerging patterns as well as points of divergence and included use of diagramming to make sense of connections (Nowell *et al.*, 2017).

### **An evolving model of school leadership in the COVID-19 crisis**

Drawing on key components of a school as a dynamic organisation, as envisaged by Day *et al.* (1990), the data provided rich accounts of the external and internal influences, relationships and responses to such a challenging event as a lockdown of schools and the potential for lack of cohesiveness and breakdown of relationships. External pressures and expectations had strong influence, sometimes undermining leaders' strategies, since headteachers often received contradictory or changing advice, through multiple media as well as directly to schools e.g., regarding reopening plans, reporting to parents, risk assessment and safeguarding. Nevertheless, despite such uncertainty and situational ambiguity, the stories of individual schools through the words of headteachers presented us with resilient responses, demonstrating adaptation of leadership models to shape new ways of working together, and sharing responsibilities around leadership teams and sometimes beyond them. For example, many classroom teachers took the lead in developing new curriculum approaches and teaching materials and making innovative use of technology to support learning and social connectedness. One headteacher characterised their own approach as less time spent on management and more attention given to leadership.

Further accompanying elements were also needed to sustain headteachers' approaches. Flatter team structures emerged to make agile responses to emergent local need, encouraging or reinforcing the need for trust and positive relationships. These were

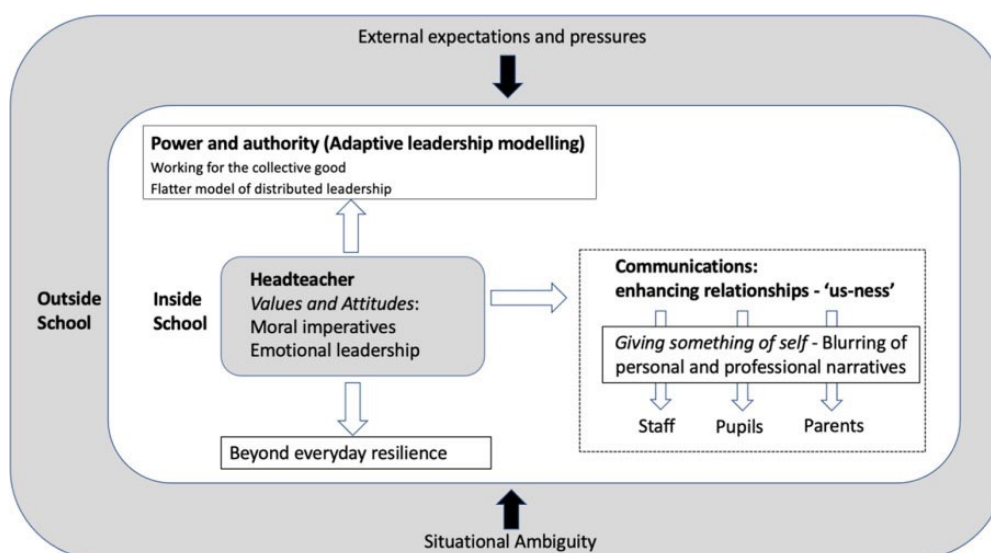
supported by a focus on values and a sense of purpose, engendered by the headteachers and maintained in relationships with schools and their wider communities. In order to maintain or enhance relationships, it was essential to establish ways of communicating and interacting in such a way that the community of the school still felt both coherent and tangible. Haslam *et al.*, (2020)'s concept of a school imaginary shared by its community applies here to what was, effectively, the sum of the collective thinking of all involved, however widely dispersed they were physically.

A powerful element in this school imaginary was an emphasis on 'professional capital' (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012), where a moral and ethical engagement with social justice issues underpinned the schools' perceived roles. These are features often found in forms of distributed leadership and linked to effective forms of social change (Woods, 2011; Woods & Roberts 2016). It is within such an environment that headteachers often shared on a personal and emotional level, making themselves vulnerable, for instance by using new forms of communication, such as reflective blogs or vlogs, to reach out to staff or wider school communities. These were used for sharing both educational material and personal experiences and challenges, perhaps helping to reinforce the relationships between headteacher and staff as well as headteacher and parents/children. Moral imperatives also led to practical efforts to support children and their parents with additional teaching and learning resources, telephone hotlines and even food parcels, along with caring conversations intended to alleviate parental anxiety .

In this unique in-the-moment study, we sought an understanding of leaders during the unprecedented circumstances of the pandemic, and we have shared the key elements that came into play as headteachers worked towards building community relationships, dialogues, support and a flatter leadership model. We have characterised this as constructing a school imaginary that goes beyond the perhaps more rule laden and measurement-oriented community supported by the schools' accountability systems in the UK. We have noted the importance of the need for a sense of the 'usness' sought by headteachers, as they aimed to sustain the collective good through mutual trust and fairness, as well as the sharing of leadership vulnerability. Through their actions, the physical dislocation of community, which could have undermined it, in reality led to creative approaches to maintaining and extending relationships and support (see figure 1).



Within our model, the headteacher is situated at the heart of the community building mentioned, but the model also acknowledges the pressures and challenges being brought to bear. It must be acknowledged that during the pandemic routine pressure was often lifted (e.g., school inspections and national tests were paused), but new pressures came via policy and advice on societal restrictions, as we will return to below. Concern for the emotional and social well-being of all those in the school community led to a strong emphasis on moral and emotional leadership and, for some, a flatter leadership structure. Headteachers' emotional commitment to their school community led them to make themselves vulnerable to the wider group through the sharing of personal narratives within the professional context. Whilst no set leadership style emerged, it became clear that headteachers embraced an adaptive leadership approach and looked to maintaining or enhancing communication across many different groups, both formal and informal, to help continue a positive relational community.



**Figure 1:** Model of school leadership in the early stages of the COVID-19 crisis.

In all these leadership activities, however, headteachers needed to maintain their own resilience and more as they led their schools through a period of unpredictable change. This was not without challenges, as events could take away their control. As one headteacher commented:

I think from quite a personal point of view quite a large part of my identity is the job that I do, and I feel quite strongly that that identity has been taken away rather which has led to all sorts of levels of anxiety and worry.

Beyond the everyday resilience, conceptualised by Day (2012), something more profound was called for when dealing with loss in the school community during this period. While this has always happened, the scale and unexpectedness presented challenges. As the same headteacher reported:

Such events stress the importance of resilience in emotional leadership for all members of the school community, but also reflect the values and attitudes that motivate headteachers as they lead their schools through exceptional times.

### **Future challenges of leading schools in the public interest**

As we write, schools in the UK at least have returned to their physical incarnation, but uncertainty continues as infection rates fluctuate and more lock downs remain possible. This continued uncertainty raises questions about the extent to which schools are maintaining the strengths of the first model, for example, the blurring of boundaries, enhanced communication and a powerful sense of community and any new challenges that might be affecting these. In Chapter 1, six intelligent leadership questions were posed ('why?', 'what?', 'when', 'how?', 'where?' and 'who?') and these provide the structure for our consideration of changes that might need to be made to our model in light of this almost peri-pandemic situation – the 'when' – in the UK – the 'where'.

1. *What* are the external pressures and expectations now and how are they affecting leaders and their schools? Previously, these had become more muted during the pandemic.
2. *How* are headteachers using their adaptive leadership models as we move into physical environments? Are they able to maintain the flatter leadership model and to retain the powerful emphasis on maintaining a sense of 'usness' as they work towards the collective good?
3. *What* place does emotional and moral leadership hold in the return to embodied school experiences? Are professional and personal boundaries rebuilt?
4. *Who* is able to advocate appropriate morals, values and emotional leadership in schools in the context of the emerging post-pandemic paradigm surrounding public leadership?

We acknowledge that while our original model was rooted in empirical evidence, there is inevitably a degree of speculation in the revised version below. There remain many unknowns, such as possible challenges to the enhanced sense of ‘us-ness’ if traditional hierarchies are imposed/accepted or other. In addition, one of the most concerning aspects of this revised model lies in the area of adaptive leadership as external hierarchies exert power/authority over schools as they re-engage with them, possibly in a way which may challenge the established a school community united by shared identity and blurred boundaries. We have attempted to represent this situational ambiguity in our revised model, but it remains tentative, as so much uncertainty lingers around whether the pandemic has paused or will lessen. We believe, however, that it provides the basis for collective reflection and discussion.

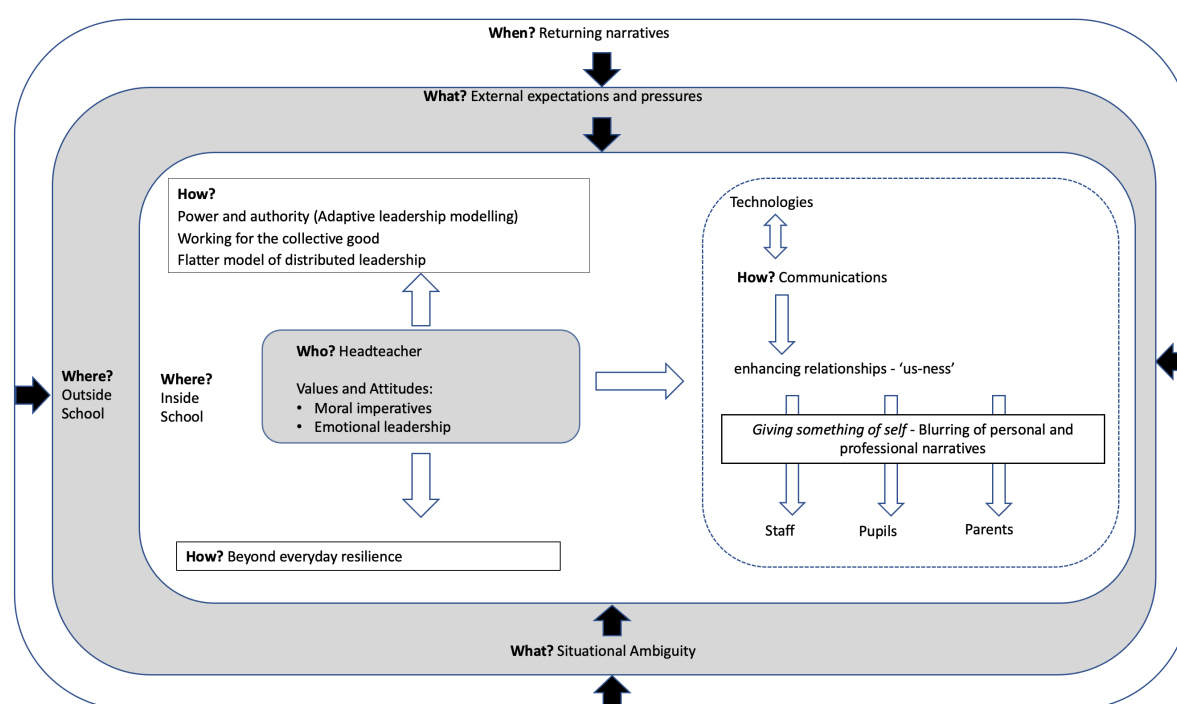


Figure 2: Revised model of returning narratives

When UK schools reopened in the summer and autumn 2021 school leaders navigated high levels of risk, continuing challenges and new opportunities. If the ‘recovery’ is to address rather than recreate the social vulnerabilities heightened by the pandemic, research suggests that principled public leadership is needed to foster connections and a sense of shared interest and belonging across professional and organisational boundaries (Jetten *et al.*, 2020; Haslam *et al.*, 2020). However, as the education sector emerges from the ‘great pause’ induced by school closures into an era of intense policy activity, one lesson that has not been

learned in the UK (and particularly in England) is the deleterious impact of mismatched layers of concurrent policies directed at schools. These include large-scale curriculum reform, ongoing assessment issues, active promotion of inter-local competition and outsourcing of education services, changes to the school inspection framework in England and Wales and, in England, the introduction of new national qualifications, a review of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, and Market Review of initial teacher education. At the same time, UK Government changes to welfare policies have increased child poverty in the UK, which is projected to reach 5.2 million by 2022 (Social Mobility Commission, 2020). The fragmentation of service delivery through public sector modernisation presents a barrier to better coordination between education, children's social care and mental health services across an increasingly (dis)United Kingdom (Elliot *et al.*, 2021).

Such policy 'hyperactivity' and yet 'incoherence' (Ball, 2021, p.387) characterises government responses to the new and deepening challenges following the pandemic. Challenges include a persistent digital divide, a pronounced spike in elective home education, increased numbers of children without a school place, escalating incidences of mental health crises among adolescents, and a widening opportunity gap that defies rhetorical commitments to 'levelling up'. More than 40,000 pupils were formally taken out of school in the UK between September 2020 and April 2021, compared with an average of 23,000 over the previous two years (BBC News, 19 July 2021). It is widely acknowledged that disadvantaged pupils living in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods experienced disproportionately higher learning loss and are catching up at a slower pace (Green, 2020; Major *et al.*, 2021). The UK record for educational equity is poor, ranked 44<sup>th</sup> among 61 high-income economies on the World Economic Forum's Social Mobility Index 2020. The scale of the post-pandemic education and care challenge suggests a need to adjust the schools' workforce and curriculum objectives to address unmet need. School communities will require time and space to build relational trust, embed new ways of learning, and to prepare and deploy staff for inclusion and wellbeing.

Early indications suggest the education sector is not recalibrating external accountabilities to address these new priorities at the same pace that localised responses were made at the height of the health crisis, especially in the secondary phase. The centralising tendencies that were evident prior to the pandemic persist and, in some areas, have intensified in the recovery period. Responses across the four nations have differed in terms of pace and focus and are mediated by different systems of school governance and national strategies to reduce

social inequality. An espoused commitment to partnership and professional networks is more evident in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Department for Education in England was the first to reopen schools and resume school inspections and the last to cancel external examinations. While England fully reopened schools prior to the end of the spring term 2021, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland adopted a more cautious and collaborative approach. The scope for professional judgement and deliberative democracy narrowed with the speed of the executive response. The following section draws on three examples – school inspection, pupil assessment and the equity ‘catch up’ spend – to consider the scope for ethical and educative leadership within multiple accountabilities and designated resources. The section concludes by returning to the revised model (figure 2) to consider how experiences of leading inclusively in the pandemic might support a reorientation from hierarchical and transformative models to relational and ethical models of leadership.

### ***Inspection***

While intended to be developmental as well as evaluative, inspection encourages compliance and constrains local innovation (Colman, 2021). During the period of school closures from March 2020, school inspectorates in the four nations limited activity to emergency monitoring visits with inspections only where serious concerns were identified. Headteachers valued temporary respite from inspection as an opportunity to “hit the reset button” and return to core values (Hulme *et al.*, 2021, p.12). In England, the respite was short-lived and Ofsted resumed a full programme of graded school inspections from Autumn 2021. In contrast, in Wales Estyn suspended inspections into the autumn term 2021, and new inspection arrangements will be piloted with a small number of schools and Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) from spring 2022. Estyn has focused school support through 2021/22 on the introduction of the new Curriculum for Wales and additional learning needs reform. Similarly, in Northern Ireland from autumn 2021 the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETINI) focused on capacity building for self-evaluation with limited monitoring. Education Scotland did not resume school inspection until January 2022 and conducted three national thematic inspections to support education recovery: supporting children’s and young people’s wellbeing; local approaches to recovery; and outdoor learning.

### ***Assessment***

Summer exams across the UK in 2020 were replaced with a controversial grading processes involving centre assessment followed by statistical standardisation. The grading algorithm was abandoned in favour of teacher/ centre assessment because individual grades were, in part, based on data from past students at the same school, limiting achievement above the norm and disadvantaging high performing students from schools with lower records of performance (Kippin and Cairney, 2021). While final grades were significantly higher than previous years, grade inflation reproduced existing patterns of relative advantage (Roberts and Danechi, 2021). While all four nations cancelled summer assessment in 2021 the timeliness of the announcement differed across jurisdictions. Scotland and Wales cancelled exams in October and November 2020 respectively, while schools in England and Northern Ireland did not receive confirmation until January 2021. Exams will resume in summer 2022 across the four nations. In England, performance tables will also recommence to permit competitive comparison across the schools' market. The commodification of public value via national league tables further restricts local deliberation on education priorities.

### ***Catch-up support***

National governments across the UK provided additional catch-up funding to schools. However, the level of support and the extent to which support is targeted at the most disadvantaged pupils varies: £200 in Scotland, £174 in England, £88 in Wales and £82 in Northern Ireland (Sibieta and Cottell, 2021, p.6). While the level of funding is lower in Wales and Northern Ireland, a greater proportion is directed towards the most disadvantaged pupils (around 50% compared with 20-30% in England and Scotland (*op cit*). Investment across the UK is small in comparison with other advanced economies and the additional education funding in the UK will scarcely reverse the sustained cuts imposed following the 2008 global financial crisis.

### **Discussion**

The last thirty years have been marked by the rise of data-driven *technical-managerial* forms of accountability that have reduced the possibility of relationships characterised by *professional* and *democratic* accountability (Biesta, 2020). The refashioning of responsibility as being accountable to government for centrally defined outcomes has implications for what now constitutes ethical public leadership. The metrification of everything constructs a new professionalism that values efficient data management above ethical deliberation (Gunter

and Courtney, 2021). As a consequence of an outcomes-driven Global Education Reform Movement (GERM), decisions over curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are increasingly taken beyond the school by external agencies (Sahlberg, 2012). Anderson and Cohen (2015) note how 'principals are being given more and more "autonomy" to exercise leadership over less and less' (p.5). Choice is limited to the selection of government-approved providers or mode of delivery (outsourcing), rather than deliberation on the nature of provision. Pedagogical authority is displaced by scientifically validated evidence of 'what works', albeit adjusted to context – for example, Education Endowment Foundation (the UK government-designated What Works Centre for Education). In England, market logic dominates and educationists who transgress central direction are disparaged, discredited and marginalised. The Ofsted Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman, criticised schools for prioritising food parcels and home visits above developing fully online education in the early stages of school closure (Institute for Government 2021). Some of the headteachers in our study made it clear their students would not be able to learn because they were hungry or felt unsafe. There is a clear mismatch here, we suggest of values, priority and understanding of the educational context.

From an optimistic stance, the disruption of the pandemic extended a brief opportunity to reclaim professional accountability. School leaders were less 'bounded ethically' (DeMatthews *et al.*, 2021, p.338) by the temporary interruption to top-down performance measures. On resumption of in-school learning, school leaders, parents and students were brought back into debates around what matters most. This was demonstrated in student activism against the assessment algorithm in summer 2020, and heightened advocacy to improve provision for young people with additional needs. At school-level, the scope and capacity for activism is contingent on the 'moral literacy' of school leaders i.e., 'ethics sensitivity, moral reasoning and moral imagination' (Lowery 2020, p.118). As illustrated by the examples above, space for ethical action is constrained by the degree of autonomy leaders can exercise within prevailing structures and cultures. We use Woods *et al.*'s (2021) definition of autonomy as, 'the capability to adopt for oneself the principles, rules or values that guide one's action' (p. 75). DeMatthews *et al.* (2021) have described how high stakes accountability can lead school leaders into 'misjudgement, ethical blind spots, and behaviours that are not always in alignment to their moral and ethical values' (p.336). In her exploration of the 'dark side' of leadership, Sam (2021) observes that, 'effective leadership and ethical leadership are not necessarily the same' (p.304).

Although school leaders in the UK and elsewhere have lost a significant measure of control over educational practices, this does not preclude leader agency (Priestley, 2015). As noted above, leader agency is expressed in different forms of policy engagement that can include accommodation, evasion and resistance. Moore and Clarke (2016, p. 668) use Berlant's (2011) notion of 'cruel optimism' to describe how educators' energies and commitments to social justice are routinely co-opted to technical rational ends. However, by contrast, Tay *et al.* (2020) describe how middle leaders exercise *technical* leadership as they comply with test-based accountabilities, but also how they engage in *tactical* and *ethical* leadership. The practice of ethical leadership is contingent on sustained critical reflection and problem posing (Woods *et al.*, 2021). In this study of sensemaking during the early stages of the pandemic, headteachers demonstrated 'hyper-vigilance' and engaged in 'bridging, brokering and buffering' tactics to sustain and re-shape provision in response to emergent local needs (Hulme *et al.*, 2021, p.11, p.13). The practice of critical reflexivity, tactical action and distributed leadership may support and promote continued collaboration and ethical defence of educational values.

Headteachers are positioned as active 'policymakers' (Koyama, 2013, p.300), as local leaders with the potential to drive equity policies. While vertical levers remain strong, the pandemic exposed the need for greater horizontal and cross-Department working between Education and Health and Social Care, and localised joint work between children's services and the schools' workforce in every region and nation of the UK. Building strong horizontal structures and empowering local actors is a key lesson and future opportunity.

## **Conclusion**

The headteachers in this study had clear views that public leadership takes responsibility for people within the communities that leaders lead. Headteachers interpret those communities very broadly, including not just their students and staff but also everyone linked to those groups. Comparison of their thinking about models of leadership suggests they may conceptualise leadership differently within their individual contexts, but that they all follow their personal principles and values, which are person-centred. Under great pressure of events, they did not assume autocratic leadership styles, but tended strongly towards wider distribution of leadership activities. The core purpose of education i.e., learning and teaching, promoted remotely through use of technology, was a key theme, but the emotional and physical well-being of students and staff were also essential drivers for



headteachers' actions. Even in a pandemic situation, or perhaps especially within a pandemic situation, they led in the public interest by engaging with their values to benefit their communities. Moreover, in challenging times they devolved and shared leadership with anyone who could contribute skills to assist the enterprise. There is also evidence that practising leadership amid the communities which surrounded schools meant that leadership is more pragmatically and usefully applied, because individuals and groups of individuals embedded within them knew best what was needed. However, it appears that those with wider posts of responsibility at regional or national level had less knowledge and a far less skilled grasp of what is needed 'on the ground'.

We cannot foresee if or when school leaders may have to face another pandemic, but scientists are affirming to us already that "This will not be the last time a virus threatens our lives and our livelihoods" (Gilbert, 2021). Clearly, training for future school leaders might sensibly include learning from those who have endured the heat of battle in the last two years.

In schools, a paradigm shift from place-based learning to digital and/or blended learning as well as the changing manifestations of relationships and support within the school imaginary, created space for a subtle adaptive, moral and emotional leadership. Despite the returning potential for increasing pressure externally and the expected ongoing uncertainty, we have to question whether leaders in schools who reflect the model we have outlined, will be ready to allow the positive changes to be lost? It is also highly unlikely that technological progression in schools and more dynamic forms of learning visualised and enacted will disappear completely. Consequently, the importance of school leaders, in these pivotal days, reflecting on the potential for transformative experiences within their school communities where a shared identity and the pursuit of a common good can enhance the school imaginary, cannot be underestimated.

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