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Embracing vulnerability: How has Covid-19 affected the pressures school leaders in Northern England face and how they deal with them?

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Abstract

Research into the effects of pressure on schools and school leaders has focused more on its impacts at system level than on the human impact on leaders themselves. Using theories of vulnerability, this paper attempts to redress this balance, examining the challenges school leaders faced during the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, the support they accessed, and what this says about how schools might be rethought. Located in the North East of England, the study combined an online survey of 132 school leaders with in-depth interviews with five leaders in 2020. The research found that the pandemic has had an amplifying effect, increasing the pressures they already felt and increasing their responsibilities. It also found that many find it difficult to admit when they are under pressure and a large proportion have no source of support when they felt exhausted. This suggests new ways need to be found to help all leaders, and particularly male and secondary leaders, to admit a sense of vulnerability and access professional support. The overwhelming majority of leaders surveyed wanted to increase trust in the school system, reduce accountability and a renewed focus on the mental health of both children and adults in schools.

Key words: leadership, vulnerability, pressure, covid, self-improving system

While pressures on schools and school leaders to maintain standards and improve attainment continue to increase (Simkins et al. 2018), research still largely focuses on their effects at the system level, examining issues such as improving succession planning and recruitment (Bush 2011; NAHT 2019), rather than the human impact on school leaders as individuals. Drawing on theories of vulnerability, this paper attempts to redress the balance, examining the effects on leaders of policy emphasis on school 'self-improvement' in England, whether the Covid-

19 pandemic has increased, or reduced, pressures on leaders, and the extent to which it offers an opportunity to rethink schools. The research focused on exploring the perspectives of school leaders working in the North East of England in order to explore in depth the contextual factors which affect them. Its contribution is to use vulnerability theory to try to understand the challenges and responses of school leaders during a period of unprecedented crisis.

Context: The English school system

While characteristics associated with neoliberalism such as high levels of accountability, marketisation and competition can be found in education systems across the world, schools and school leaders in England face a particularly intense set of pressures (Ball, 2017). A strict school inspection regime and school league tables were introduced in the early 1990s, followed by many school improvement initiatives aimed to improve "failing" schools with the result that many still feel they are one inspection judgement away from dismissal (Thompson, Lingard, and Ball, 2020). From 2010 schools were incentivised to become academies, publicly funded schools which are independent of local authority (LA) oversight and held accountable directly by the Department for Education. Government statistics show that 78% of secondary schools and 37% of primary schools had become academies by January 2021. Many are grouped into one of the 1170 multi-academy trusts (MATs) that currently manage two or more academies, overseen by a CEO and a single board of trustees. The *Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010), the White Paper which introduced these changes, represented them as increasing autonomy and school to school support to create a "self-improving" school system. Hargreaves (2010) early conceptual work identifying its four building blocks of collaborative school clusters; a local solutions approach; co-construction between schools; and system leaders operating across schools and localities.

Combined with austerity measures and budget cuts severely reduced local government funding and capacity from 2010, this is the policy context in which this research into the pressures school leaders face was conducted. The North East of England was selected for the research because some areas have high levels of poverty and disadvantage, which are associated with increasing pressures on schools, and because schools there have been held to underperform in comparison with other regions, although the evidence for that, especially at primary level, has been contested (Jopling 2018).

Literature review: Precarity, isolation and vulnerability among school leaders

For school leaders in England, the precarity of their position derives from the unrelenting pressure to improve standards and results already cited. It has long been a feature of school leadership research, in England and elsewhere, that excessive demands, pressure and burnouts have been associated with a real or impending crisis in recruitment and retention (Bush 2011). Almost 20 years ago, Ginsberg & Gray Davies (2003) found that little research had focused explicitly on the effects of emotional experiences on leaders. While this is no longer the case, Berkovich & Eyal's (2015) review of the international evidence about educational leaders and emotions between 1992 and 2012 identified only 49 studies for analysis. They highlighted three core themes: the factors influencing the leaders' emotions; leaders' behaviours and their effects on followers' emotions; and leaders' emotional abilities. The smaller evidence base relating to England has tended to focus on the third of these areas. For example, in a study of primary school leaders Crawford (2007, 96) identified the polarisation between the apparent rationality of leadership effectiveness and a growing focus on leaders' need for emotional intelligence, concluding that: "Research into emotion in educational leadership can enable educational leaders to examine the way they handle their own emotions, how that interacts with the emotional climate of a school and the implications for their own leadership". This echoed similar findings from Beatty (2000) and Zorn and Boler (2007). Steward (2014) focused on how leaders in three English local authorities (LAs) developed emotional resilience, identifying the key roles played by leaders' early influences and the importance of both energy and agency in helping leaders cope with the challenges they face, This was countered by Morrison and Ecclestone (2011) who argued against excessive concentration on the emotional elements of leadership in leadership development programmes, particularly if that meant they did not "question the structures and activities of current educational practices or are used to downgrade cognitive and substantive knowledge and skills".

Connected with this is the longstanding literature relating to headteacher isolation (Jones 1994; Dussault and Thibodeau 1997). Recent research has focused on exploring the multidimensional nature of isolation and a similarly complex set of ameliorating factors. For example, Howard & Mallory (2008) identified the need for effective personal and professional support systems and social support from colleagues, alongside factors such as having a strong sense of purpose, distributing leadership, and ensuring they have time for

family and friends. Similarly, in their study of headteacher burnout, Stephenson & Bauer (2010) emphasised the complexity of isolation as a variable and found that while research has associated reduced teacher isolation with improved student outcomes, less attention has been paid to its impact on school leaders. They also found that reducing burnout should involve both reducing role overload and ensuring social support, but that facilitating supplementary collaboration (central to the kinds of school-to-school support promoted in England) among leaders working at distance from each other is difficult. Reflecting this and other previous research (e.g. Izgar 2009), Tahir et al's (2017) examination of new headteachers in Malaysia found that isolation was a feature of the early stages of becoming a leader and focused on its causes and strategies to overcome it, rather than its effects. They found that female leaders and those working in urban primary schools felt more isolated, but that isolation was relatively short-lived and could be overcome by mentoring (a common finding, contradicted by Stephenson and Bauer (2010) albeit in relation to coaching); constant interaction with other teachers; and including socialization strategies in training. However, they also found that other leaders' unwillingness to share knowledge and ideas contributed to their sense of isolation. Berkovich & Eyal's (2015, 140) review found that some leaders' attempts to reduce their isolation by discussing their emotions with staff "increased their sense of vulnerability". This is an issue that requires further investigation.

Approaching and embracing vulnerability

Salvatore and McVarish (2014) begin their metalogue on vulnerability with the recognition of the negativity of dictionary definitions of vulnerability, which focus on openness to attack or criticism. This should be seen against the backdrop of what has been identified as a 'vulnerability zeitgeist' in social policy in recent years (Ecclestone and Rawdin 2016), as groups, families or young people characterised as 'vulnerable' have become subject to a range of intervention programmes in the UK, Europe and North America. This has been reflected in education in the ways in which students previously described as 'disadvantaged', 'under-achieving' or having special educational needs or a disability have been recategorized as 'vulnerable' and schools monitor their progress carefully. In the English context this was evident in the 13 uses of the word in *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE 2010), which introduced the notion of the self-improving school system. It is difficult not to conclude with Potter and Brotherton (2013) that this ubiquity has effectively neutralised 'vulnerability' in policy. It has also exacerbated its negative connotations and increased the pressure on schools and school leaders to improve provision for and the achievement of students classified in this

way.

The utility and appropriateness of applying the term 'vulnerable' in this way have been criticised for reflecting the growing therapeutic emphasis in social justice and education and diverting resources away from those most in need by Ecclestone and Hayes (2019). However, they also counsel against "the construction of the idea of human beings as vulnerable and diminished that is being strengthened through therapeutic education" (Ecclestone & Hayes (2019, 22). This negative conceptualization of vulnerability is also common in the body of research that has developed exploring vulnerability in teachers and, less commonly, in school leaders. Kelchtermans' (1996, 312) influential work identifies vulnerability as a structural issue "when teachers feel powerless or politically ineffective in the micro-political struggles about their desired workplace conditions", rather than as a primarily emotional or experiential condition. He suggests that teachers' experience vulnerability at various levels: in the classroom; in school in response to the demands and expectations of colleagues, leaders and parents; and beyond that in response to policy changes. Applying this to school leaders, Kelchtermans, Piot and Ballet (2011) portray them as gatekeepers, also beset by similarly varying demands, whose vulnerability is related to their position caught between "loneliness and belonging". These conceptualisations are important but remain restricted in their view of vulnerability. This elision of the notion of vulnerability with being diminished or 'at risk', which much practice in schools in relation to vulnerable young people seems (often unintentionally) to perpetuate, obscures the potential for vulnerability to be regarded more positively. Doing so may help school leaders both to reject the deficit thinking associated with the term and to cope with the challenges they face.

Ketchermans (2005) ends another study by suggesting that vulnerability should both endured and 'embraced', which points towards Angel's (2021, 132) warning in a rather different context that resisting vulnerability risks closing off the self:

> "When you feel vulnerable, it's tempting to brace yourself against vulnerability – the fantasy of hardening yourself so that nothing can hurt you. The collateral, however, is that nothing can reach you, either."

This echoes Bullough's (2005, 23) study of teachability and vulnerability in which he directly addresses the negative connotations of the latter term in asserting that "To be vulnerable is to be capable of being hurt, but to be invulnerable, if such a state is possible, is to limit the

potential for learning". He suggests that a balance needs to be struck to ensure that the "burden of vulnerability" does not become too great for teachers and to allow them, and their students, to take risks. In a recent revision of the earlier paper, he added that is most likely to occur "within a committed professional community and least likely in isolation" (Bullough, 2019, 117). This has important implications for school leaders, given the tension between isolation and belonging identified by Kelchtermans et al. (2011). Referencing Bullough (2005), Salvatore and McVarish (2014, 49) reject negative definitions of vulnerability and suggest that "vulnerability in the classroom helps to establish a constructivist mindset, one that allows all participants in the room to learn." This moves us towards a more active, even activist notion of vulnerability, which is captured in some extent in Ruck Simmonds' (2007) notion of "critical vulnerability". Drawing on Freire, Ruck Simmonds (2007, 84) describes this as as an act of resistance: "To be critically vulnerable, therefore, implies a conscious recognition and willingness to transform society, and its institutions, into places where equity is experienced rather than considered". She suggests that critical vulnerability requires an open approach focusing on cultivating strategic risk-taking, soulwork (reflective self-interrogation), creativity, and community-building.

These more positive (and critical) notions of vulnerability guided the analysis reported in this paper. The research explores whether encouraging school leaders to recognise the inherent vulnerability of their position as leaders and individuals might help them to deal with the stress and isolation which they often face. This is supported by the idea that the capacity to reflect in teaching, and leading teaching, is closely related to the acceptance of uncertainty. Dale & Frye (2009, 124) capture this in their hope that teachers remain learners in order to "experience the joys and the delights as well as the discomforts and tensions of vulnerability and uncertainty".

This suggests that relinquishing some control and acknowledging, even embracing their vulnerability may help leaders cope with the precarity and uncertainty of their position, resist enduring "inspirational" leadership models (Ruck Simmonds, 2007), and build stronger relationships with vulnerable young people in their schools. In order to do this, we need first to gain a much better understanding of the pressures school leaders feel they are under and how they deal with them. The research reported on here was designed to do this. Although it was conceived earlier, the fact that it was conducted during the early phases of the Covid-19

lockdown, which has intensified and magnified so many of the challenges which school leaders face, gave us a unique opportunity to explore leaders' experiences of extreme stress, vulnerability and new kinds of isolation and uncertainty with leaders in real-time.

Methodology

The research questions behind this project, conceived before the pandemic struck, were:

- What challenges do school leaders face in North East England?
- Whom do they go to for support?

Following the pandemic, we refined the third research question, which initially focused on the factors associated with these challenges, to the following:

- How can we use this knowledge to rethink aspects of how schools work?

To address these questions, the research adopted a mixed methods design, combining a survey of school leaders (including deputy and assistant headteachers) in the North East of England with semi-structured interviews with five headteachers in three LAs in the region. The theoretical framework for the research applied theoretical constructions of vulnerability, such as those already discussed, to school leaders and were also informed by research into the self-improving school system (Greany and Higham, 2018; Hadfield and Ainscow, 2018).

The questionnaire survey was designed to collect leaders' immediate responses to the challenges of the COVID-19 lockdown quickly, the notion of collecting leaders' views in relation to areas such as perceived stress and the role of school leadership and collaboration quickly in real time took the school barometer surveys undertaken in Germany, Austria and Switzerland (Huber and Helm, 2020) as an inspiration. It was piloted in May 2020 with a small group of school leaders not subsequently involved in the study, after which questions about autonomy and drop-down response menus were added, based on the responses and feedback. Informed by the literature reviewed, the survey explored the challenges leaders faced, the extent to which this put them under pressure and the support they draw on to cope. It also addressed issues of autonomy (and questions of trust and job satisfaction not reported in this paper), as well as whether and how they thought the pandemic represented an opportunity to rethink schools. It was distributed online in June and July 2020 to all schools in the North East of England with which we and our colleagues work as researchers, initial

teacher educators and LA advisers in order to maximise the response rate before the summer break. Thus, the survey collected responses at the end of a school year in which the pandemic caused many schools to close after March except for children from key worker and 'vulnerable' families.

The interviews were conducted online late in 2020 to explore the issues identified in the survey in more depth and assess to what extent the autumn term of 2020/21 (when schools also closed) affected the experiences of the leaders interviewed. were recruited through one of the researcher's professional networks among headteachers and school improvement advisers in the region. Four of the leaders were primary headteachers and the fifth led a middle school. Five secondary headteachers in two LAs were also approached but were either too busy to participate or did not respond, which is understandable given the effects of the pandemic at the time. Our intention was always to draw on a relatively small sample in order to add depth to the survey outcomes while also minimising disruption to school leaders' work at a time of uncertainty and exhaustion.

Sample

There are 858 schools in North East England. The questionnaire surveys were completed by 132 school leaders in 7 of the 12 LAs located in North East England. Almost three-quarters of the respondents were female (72.7%; n=96), 26.5% (n=31) were male and one respondent preferred not to specify. The overwhelming majority were headteachers (82.6%; n=109), the others were deputy or assistant headteachers (11.4%; n=15), CEOs or Executive Principals (4.5%; n=6) and other (1.5%; n=2). Five of the six CEOs and 60% (n=6) of the deputies/ assistants were female. The majority worked in primary schools (62.1%; n=82), 17.4% (n=23) in secondaries, 12.1% (n=16) in first schools, 4.5% (n=6) in middle schools and 3.0% in special schools (n=4). Most secondary leaders (60.9%; n=14) and all special school leaders were male and most primary (80.5%; n=66) and first school (81.3%; n=13) leaders were female. Two-thirds of respondents (67.4%; n=89) were based in local authority-maintained schools (with local support and oversight), a quarter (25.0%; n=33) were based in academies (independent schools funded directly by government); the others regarded themselves as other (n=7) or worked in a pupil referral unit (n=1). The leaders were very experienced. Just over half (51.5%; n=68) had been in post for six years or more and over two-thirds (68.9%; n=91) had been in teaching for between 16 and 30 years.

Of the five headteachers interviewed, two led schools in areas with high levels of disadvantage in one LA (L1 and L3), the middle school leader (L5) had a more mixed catchment in a second LA, and the remaining leaders (L2, L4) worked in more affluent areas in the third, larger LA, which had retained more elements of school support and advice services that the LAs had lost due to national funding cuts after 2010. Two leaders (L1 and L2) were female.

Data analysis

Due to the relatively small sample, only descriptive and thematic analysis were applied to survey data, differentiating the responses by gender, school type and job role because they were the most relevant to our research questions. Some responses to open questions have also been included. The interview schedule was designed to explore the issues from the survey in more depth and the data that resulted was analyzed using an iterative process of thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) to identify recurrent themes, drawing on the theoretical framework for the research and with reference to the survey data. Therefore, this paper is intended to offer a cross-section of contemporaneous views from school leaders in one region of England during the pandemic. Generalisability was not our aim and the findings should regarded as illustrative, rather than representative, of common concerns and issues among school leaders in North East England.

Findings

Challenges

The survey began by asking about the greatest challenges leaders had faced in school over the past year, offering them a selection of options derived from the pilot survey. Covid-19 and the lockdown dominated as expected, identified by 91.7% (n=121) of respondents. All CEOs and Executive Principals cited it, along with 95.1% (n=78) of primary-based respondents, but almost half of those who did not cite it (45.4%; n=5) were secondary leaders. After this came funding, cited by almost half of respondents (49.2%; n=65) and national scrutiny from Ofsted or government, which was cited by just over one-third (35.6%; n=47). Male and secondary leaders were over-represented in relation to both these challenges and more than half the deputy or assistant headteachers (60%; n=9) regarded national scrutiny as a challenge. Attendance, exclusion and behaviour issues were cited by one-third of respondents (32.6%; n=43), followed by reductions in social services (31.8%; n=42), parents (28.0%; n=37); morale (25.8%; n=34), local scrutiny (12.1%; n=16) and recruitment, which only 8.3% (n=11) of respondents identified, although this was rather higher in secondaries (17.4%;

n=4). In addition, a range of open responses were given, the most common of which related to specific challenges schools faced in relation to special educational needs and disability, English as an additional language needs, falling student numbers, and local issues relating to deprivation or the community.

The five headteachers interviewed were all asked if they agreed with the challenges identified in the survey. Interestingly, while they agreed that the impact of the pandemic was undeniable, finance and funding remained the greatest challenges they faced. In fact, Covid-19 had had an intensifying effect: "the funding and the national scrutiny is actually attached to the pressures that you're trying to cope with COVID" (L3). Two of the leaders referred to "the relentlessness of the situation", relating to the pressure of having to respond immediately at all times of the day: "It's that sort of pressure to check emails, to check notifications on a weekend or an evening so you can respond rapidly, so that people can isolate if they need to" (L4). This had had a transformational effect as leaders found themselves with both more to do and new responsibilities. They understood the importance of prioritising safety first for parents and the community as well as in school, but recognised that this was at the expense of other priorities:

> "All the things that were [important] to school leaders like academic standards, pastoral care, and wellbeing, yes they were important but they took a backseat to the relentless COVID risk assessment." (L5)

As the same leader emphasized, this had two major consequences. The first was stress, which leaders had both to monitor and mitigate as far as possible. The second was having to respond reactively. He compared this to his experience of trying collectively to turn a failing school around:

> "I'd summarise it in the last six months to going back to when we were going through the throes of trying to dig ourselves out of RI [a 'requires improvement' judgement]. Everybody needs a hand. Everybody needs some support. You're plugging your finger in the dyke to stop the holes coming through. It's a bit of a juggling act." (L5)

Pressure

Leaders were asked to estimate how often on average in the previous year they had found work stressful and felt emotionally drained or exhausted. Just under half (48.8%, n=61) had found work stressful on a daily or almost daily basis and almost one-third (32.0%; n=39) admitted to having felt drained daily or almost daily. Men (59.4%; n=19) were more likely than women (45.7%; n=42) to find work stressful, along with primary leaders (52,6.%; n=41) and those from special schools (three of the four surveyed). A similar pattern was detectable in relation to feeling drained daily or almost daily, with male (35.5%; n=11) and primary leaders (35.5%; n=27) again a little more likely to feel this. It was also related to position. More than one-third of headteachers (35.3%; n=36) admitted having felt drained daily or almost daily, compared with only two of the 12 deputies and one of the CEOs. Stress levels had also increased in an overwhelming majority of leaders since the Covid-19 lockdown (85.4%; n=105). Women were more likely to have experienced this (87.9%; n=80) than men (80.6%; n=25) and headteachers (87.5%, n=91), leaders in maintained schools (88.0%; n=73) and primaries (87.0%; n=67) were also more stressed, as were all the special school leaders.

Tellingly, over half the leaders surveyed (54.2%; n=71) said they found it difficult to admit when they felt under pressure. Despite being more likely to find work stressful, men found it slightly harder to admit vulnerability (57.1%; n=20) than women (53.7%; 51). While there was little difference between academies and LA schools, leaders in first schools (68.8%, n=11) and middle schools (66.7%, n=4) found admitting it more difficult than those in primary (51.2%, n=42) or secondary schools (54.5%, n=12). Difficulty also seemed to be associated with leaders' position. Two-thirds of deputy or assistant headteachers (66.7%, n=10) felt this way, compared with just over half the headteachers (55.6%, n=60) and only one of the six CEOs who responded. Asked why, there were 20 open responses about "keeping up a front" or maintaining a brave face, mostly for colleagues' sakes. Most ominously, one leader stated that they were motivated by not be seen to be struggling "for fear of what the repercussions that might bring".

Four of the leaders interviewed initially told us they found it difficult to admit when they felt under pressure. One leader immediately qualified this by saying: "it's a difficult thing to explain". He thought he dealt well with stress, partly because, reflecting Howard and Mallory (2008) and others, he was careful to separate work from home:

> "I think we all have mechanisms to cope with pressure and stress. I think, for example, at work I have certain colleagues I can say to them, 'Look, I need to talk things through with you' and they to me. That works really well. When I go home, I never want to do that because I also think home has to be home." (L3)

A second leader recognised the complexity of this issue, echoing some of the survey open responses and indicating how the pandemic had again increased the importance of acting as a role model:

> "Who do you admit what to as well? I'm quite sure that's the question, isn't it? You don't want to let everybody know that it is particularly difficult at this moment in time because you want your teachers to still think everything's OK (in inverted commas)." (L2)

Only one of the leaders had no problem with admitting when they felt under pressure, regarding the modelling issue differently:

> "My staff are open about the pressure that they're under and I'm open with them about that pressure that we're all under […] I think it's by being honest like that that it's much easier to run a school as an organisation where people trust each other and can support each other. I think there's a real danger in the kind of hero headteacher who does everything. I don't think it's a particularly good role model for anybody. (L4)

Reflecting the survey outcomes, the relentless pressure which has already been highlighted was common to all the leaders interviewed, with obvious negative consequences. They identified common issues such as not being able to switch off and agreed that their stress levels had increased because, as well as having to manage their own lives and the needs of children and colleagues, they also had to deal with the growing anxieties of their extended communities: "Not only are you managing a school with thousands of people connected to it if you include parents, staff, children, you're also managing your own life" (L1). Even the headteacher who did not feel his personal stress levels had increased agreed that lockdown has created new difficulties: "Headteachers have always been pulled in every direction but I think that there's an increased pressure with that at the moment" (L4).

Support

The survey then asked where leaders go for support in relation to challenges they face in school and when they feel stressed or exhausted. Logically they were most likely to turn to colleagues in school in response to challenges there. Just over half (53.8%; n=71) did this, including five of the six CEOs. Leaders in maintained schools were more likely to do so (57.3%; n=51) than academies and those in secondaries (60.9%; n=14) more than in other school types. After this came colleagues in other schools (50.0%; 66), where leaders in maintained schools (59.6%; n=53) and female leaders (56.3%; n=54) were over-represented. After this, they went to governors (36.4%; 48); family/friends (28.8%; n=37); colleagues in their LA or multi-academy trust (22.0%; 29); and local professional networks (22.0%; 29). Fewer than 15% of leaders went to their line manager or more distant professional networks on school-based issues.

There was a different picture in relation to who they went to when they felt stressed or exhausted. Most strikingly, over one-third of leaders (34.1%; n=45) indicated that they drew on none of the options for support. This group included half of the CEOs; almost half of academy leaders (48.5%; n=16) and deputy/assistant heads (46.7%; n=7); 43.5% (n=10) of secondary leaders (n=10) and 40% of male leaders. Family and friends were the most important among those who responded, selected by 42.4% (n=56) of leaders. Male leaders (34.3%, n=12) and CEOs (only one of the six in the sample) were less likely to turn to them. Leaders were much less likely to consult colleagues either in school (20.5%; n=27) or from other schools (15.2%; n=20) when stressed. All other options, which included professional networks, line managers and doctors/therapists were identified by 6% or fewer of respondents.

All the leaders interviewed had strong informal networks with local leaders. This was an important release valve and a means of validating the experiences for all of the leaders interviewed. One combined an informal WhatsApp group with local middle school leaders with support from a group of longstanding friends who had also become headteachers, two based in other countries. However, the amount of formal support they received from their LA varied. The two leaders in the largest of the three LAs appreciated the amount of support available. In contrast, one of the leaders in a smaller LA, which also had the highest levels of disadvantage, highlighted “the disparity between the support you get as a maintained school and the support you get if you’re part of a MAT” (L1). She felt its small size also

restricted the amount of formal support she was able to draw on from local leaders because "People know too much. You can't be honest" (L1), although the other leader based in the LA saw this more positively as the basis of a collaborative approach.

Access to regular support/supervision

Three-quarters of the leaders surveyed would welcome access to regular support like the supervision offered to clinical professionals (74.4%; n=87). This was most important to CEOs, male leaders and secondary leaders, all of which were overlapping groups, perhaps because they had fewer other support options. Four of the headteachers interviewed addressed this issue. One thought it was a good idea in principle "but would you want to access it?" (L3). Another also thought it would bring benefits, especially for new headteachers, and a third had explored the idea but it had never progressed. Only one of the leaders interviewed had experienced such support, which his school had offered. He was clear about the benefits:

> "At the back of the summer term I accessed some counselling, six hour [long] sessions, […] because at that point there I was probably feeling a little bit sort of short-tempered and a bit agitated […] Sometimes I carry a little bit of that baggage home. And so for that reason I accessed a little bit of counselling just to say, 'Well, this is the sort of stuff I'm contending with', and it was really good to get an impartial point of view." (L5)

Autonomy

As already indicated, the survey also asked about autonomy, one of the factors central to school self-improvement policy. More than half of respondents who answered the question felt either very autonomous (17.8%; n=21) or autonomous (36.4%; n=43). Female leaders were more likely to feel very autonomous (20.7%; n=18) than male leaders (10.0%; n=3). Leaders in maintained schools (58.8%; n=47) and primary schools (56.8%; n=42) were more likely to feel autonomous or very autonomous than those in academies (32.1%; n=9) or secondaries (42.9%; n=9). However, given the amount of pressures they also stated they faced, autonomy did not appear to be a supportive factor (Thompson et al, 2020). We also explored the leaders interviewed how autonomous they felt in the professional decisions they made. The leader who felt "completely autonomous" had moved from leading an academy to a mainstream primary school, reflecting the survey outcomes, although pressure was created

by the fact that “you have to make the decisions yourself” (L1). While two of the other leaders spoke of feeling “well-supported” in school, particularly by their governors, another feared what we might call ‘responsibility creep’:

> “There are a lot of decisions that you make, more and more and more within this job, that are so far away from children and education. From building work, from drainage, from cyclical maintenance to which support agency you go to. It never stops to be honest.” (L3)

Alongside financial constraints, he felt it was external factors, which the pandemic had intensified, that prevented him from taking some decisions, rather than lack of autonomy.

Rethinking schools

Finally, the survey asked how leaders could or should rethink schools in the light of the lockdown experience, selecting from the outcomes of the pilot survey. The most popular response was to have more trust in schools and reduce accountability pressures, which was selected by three-quarters of leaders (75.0%; n=99). Responses varied according to the gender and phase of the leaders. Female (79.2%; (n=76) and primary leaders (81.7%; n=67) were more likely to select this than male (62.9%; n=22) and secondary (65.2%; n=15) leaders. However, only 68.8% (n=11) of first school leaders selected this. After this came mental health issues. Focusing more on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, was selected by half the leaders (50.8%; n=67) selected. Again, a difference could be seen between female (53.1%; n=15) and primary (52.4%; n=43) leaders, compared with male 42.3% (n=15) and secondary leaders 43.5% (n=10). This was also the case with focusing more on the mental health and wellbeing of adults in schools, selected by 47.7% (n=63) of leaders. More than half the female (51.0%; n=49) and primary (52.4%; n=43) leaders selected this, compared with 47.8% (n=11) of secondary and 37.1% (n=13) of male leaders. Maintained school leaders regarded both issues as more important than academy leaders. The other issues cited were broadening the curriculum (33.3%; n=44); rethinking schools' role in safeguarding/social care (25.8%; n=34); changing the structure of the school day/term (25.0%; n=33); offering more online training/teaching (17.4%; n=23); and working with parents (16.7%; n=22).

Finally, we also highlight two issues which emerged when the leaders interviewed were asked how far lockdown represented an opportunity to rethink schools: accountability and technology-influenced change.

Rethinking accountability

Accountability was the primary theme that emerged from the interviews and the responses offered a nuanced picture of the issues involved. All the leaders felt that it was both necessary and useful, particularly in managing the transition into secondary school, but that the current approach was too crude and divisive. The following observation was fairly typical:

> "It's the publishing of data I think [that] causes a lot of stress and anxiety for schools, particularly because I've always worked in [disadvantaged] schools like this. And you always do the best by the children. And you shouldn't be feeling that you're not doing a good enough job just because the school down the road gets better results than you." (L1)

Concerns were also expressed about the effectiveness of high stakes assessment: "What does testing actually do?" (L3). A second leader was adamant that the pandemic had revealed both that schools' resilience and that accountability structures are not sacrosanct:

> "In terms of accountability as well, have schools fallen apart without this sort of punitive inspection regime? No, they've risen to the challenge and are doing a really really good job." (L4)

Another of the leaders hoped for assessment to be rethought to focus more on children's learning: "something which I think is a little bit more forensic […] to help the children learn in the future" (L5). Although one of the leaders regretted the negative effect on children of what he called the time wasted "finely tuning" them for SATs, mental health was not an issue which they identified in relation to rethinking schools, perhaps because it had been discussed (in relation to themselves) in other aspects of the interviews.

Technology supporting change

The use of technology was the second theme that emerged, although more in relation to instigating new ways of working than to training (which only one leader emphasised) and

teaching, which may explain why the survey did not highlight the latter issues so strongly. One of the leaders was representative in suggesting that the necessity of doing things differently had "given us a chance to explore things that we wouldn't normally choose to explore" (L2). This included improving children's digital skills, but also how they communicate with parents:

> "I think communication is key. I think sometimes in our communication systems, we just hold on to things that are archaic. […] The government, the Department of Education Ofsted, the first thing they look at is your website. I think the response [in a parent survey] was about 2% of my parents actually bothered to look at that. The mobile messages or the Facebook information page – [they are] perfect for sharing information." (L3)

In another school they were running assemblies on Zoom and no longer sending letters home but communicating with parents entirely through other media. A survey of parents had also revealed that every family had access to smartphones, which allowed them to use that technology, supplemented by DfE-supplied laptops loaned to families with bookmarks already set up with books for all the websites children needed. In such ways schools were able to overcome the barriers to learning created by the pandemic.

Conclusion

It is hardly surprising that during a period when Covid-19 has increased leaders' sense of vulnerability by closing schools and creating concerns about the long-term educational and social effects on children and young people (Van Lancker and Parolin, 2020), the overwhelming majority of leaders in our survey included it among the greatest challenges they had faced in the previous year. What is more surprising is that leaders interviewed felt that, rather than being overwhelming in itself, the pandemic had had an amplifying effect on the greatest challenges they faced, which remained finance and accountability. As one leader stated tellingly, "These things that are happening at the moment are less stressful than leading a school in special measures". Our analysis also reveals that the pandemic has presented leaders with huge pressures through 'responsibility creep' in the areas of health and safeguarding. More than eight out of ten leaders surveyed felt their stress levels had increased since the lockdown. Gender seems to have an effect in how leaders respond. Male leaders (many of whom were also secondary leaders) were more likely to feel stressed and exhausted

regularly, unlike in Tahir et al's (2017) study, and were less likely to admit it. They were also more likely to welcome counselling support. However, female leaders were more likely both to see the pandemic as a challenge and to associate it with increased stress. There were also differences according to position. Headteachers were more likely to feel drained and deputies/assistants less likely to admit feeling under pressure. This suggests that differentiated levels of targeted support needs to be available to these groups. The views of the leaders interviewed (none of whom were based in secondaries) did not obviously vary by gender or their communities' degree of disadvantage, and they all spoke of the need to remain resilient and support colleagues, children and their communities. Although leaders surveyed perhaps surprisingly felt they did not lack autonomy, albeit less so among secondary and academy leaders, the experiences of those interviewed suggest that the pandemic reduced the energy and agency that Steward (2014) asserts are essential to build leaders' emotional resilience.

In terms of whom they go to for support, our second research question, leaders had a range of sources and were understandably most likely to turn to colleagues in relation to challenges in school. The picture was less reassuring in relation to feeling stressed or exhausted. A third of leaders surveyed stated they had no sources of support in this respect, a proportion that was higher among CEOs, deputies, male and academy leaders. Although none of the leaders interviewed felt they were in this position, the fact that only one of them had had the opportunity to access any kind of counselling or supervision and that three-quarters of the leaders surveyed would welcome this kind of support suggests that this is an area that needs serious consideration. It also reveals that little progress has been made in relation to the kinds of emotional support Beatty (2000), Crawford (2007) and others were calling for more than a decade ago. Male leaders seem a particular concern, although the relatively low numbers in the research underline that this is an area for further exploration. This is where a recalibration of vulnerability, reinforced by professional support, could have a real effect. One of the leaders interviewed explicitly identified the fact that the isolation of the pandemic had underlined to her and her colleagues the importance of attending to their 'emotional wellbeing' as a group and like other participants, felt that the challenges of the pandemic had increased trust in their schools and their communities, one of Ruck Simmond's (2007) characteristics of critical vulnerability. However, the upheaval and uncertainty created by the pandemic seems to have denied leaders the space to focus on the other key elements such as

risk-taking, creativity and intense self-reflection and follow Kelchtermans (2005) in really 'embracing' their sense of vulnerability.

Trust was also the issue that emerged most strongly in relation to the final research question, how can this knowledge be used to rethink how schools work? Three-quarters of leaders wanted more trust in schools, which recent research suggests has been eroding for some time (Stone-Johnson and Miles Weiner, 2020), and less emphasis on accountability. Related to this, they also wanted more focus on supporting the mental health and wellbeing of both children and adults in schools. The leaders interviewed were clear that this did not mean abandoning accountability but building on the trust placed on them in looking after 'vulnerable' and keyworker children during the pandemic. It was also of note that the emphasis in the interviews on technology related to it being used to increase flexibility and effect change. However, along with leaders' reluctance to admit weakness, the lack of trust they identified at system level and lack of emphasis on wellbeing seem likely to prevent the development of the kind of critical vulnerability that might help them deal with, and reduce, the stress they experience.

The limitations of the research relate to its relatively small sample, the necessary use of online interviews, the relative under-representation of secondary schools and its focus on one English region. Further research is needed to explore key issues around pressure, lack of support and trust, and variations according to gender, position and school type that the pandemic has amplified. More research is also needed into the impact and human cost of pressure and precarity on school leaders, as well as into the potential for vulnerability to be regarded more positively. It is to be hoped that as schools emerge from the pandemic, leaders can use the lack of restriction as an opportunity to stimulate change and draw on the sense of vulnerability that we have all gained through it more profitably.

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