

# VULNERABLE LEADERS AND TEACHERS IN ENGLISH SCHOOLS IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP OF WELLBEING, RETENTION AND EQUITY

*Dr Domini Bingham\**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the wellbeing of school leaders and teachers in England who assessed a specific health risk during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. It explores how this cohort, guided to physically shield, was affected in attitudes towards work and the extent to which leadership behaviours supported a positive and perhaps ‘thriving’ physical return in a post-Covid-19 environment for effective schools and staff retention.

Educational systems worldwide have become a high-stakes accountability landscape, with leaders questioning how they can lead with integrity. Staff wellbeing has moved up the agenda in England, forming part of England’s inspection framework, with one criterion being that staff consistently report high levels of support for wellbeing issues (Ofsted, 2019).

Insufficient numbers of teachers, with an early exit of novices, is a particularly negative structural feature of the English school system (OECD 2017). A large scale quantitative study indicates that teacher retention is crucial to meet rising pupil numbers (Worth and van den Brande 2020). In the same study, unmanageable workloads and low job satisfaction are cited as significant factors determining teachers’ retention decisions and where teacher autonomy is strongly related to the extent to which teachers regard their workload as manageable (ibid).

The study is as concerned with leadership capability as the wellbeing and retention of staff and decision-making driving processes. It is in the development of leaders faced with extraordinary stresses that researchers can understand where gaps lie in leadership development and organisational structure and culture and how these gaps might be strategically addressed. The empirical research on which the paper is based explores some facets for leading effectively in extraordinary circumstances. The paper presents findings on how external structural government directives have challenged schools in carrying out their instructions, amplifying inequality.

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\* Assistant Professor, Centre for Educational Leadership, UCL, London.

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In March 2020, the UK announced a first lockdown due to an exponential rise in Covid-19 cases with 2.2 million people nominated to a shielded list, deemed critically extremely vulnerable (CEV) (NHS Digital 2020). Approximately 12,000 teachers and school leaders were on this list, representing 2% of the wider CEV working population (NEU 2020), from 453,813 full time teachers and leaders employed in 2019 (DfE 2019).

With government directives implemented with little warning and rapid changes of direction, teacher and union responses to a partial reopening of English schools in June 2020 and full return in Autumn 2020 (a proportion of schools remained partially open) were unconvinced. High levels of anxiety with heightened awareness of morbidity were indicated for this cohort (Nat Centre 2020).

At the point schools returned more widely, shielding teachers and leaders may have been absent due to contagion creating difficulties in staffing, with school openings disrupted. Thus retention of those shielding and isolated in a school's strategy agenda is pertinent in ensuring maximum retention when teacher retention is a longstanding issue (OECD 2017, 2020). How might this potentially charged situation be mitigated or best handled? The research sheds light on leadership behaviours and capabilities, wellbeing challenges and considers some best practices for post-Covid-19 subjected to sporadic lockdowns uncovering structural system inequality.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Under a wellbeing perspective (Seligman 1991, Peterson and Seligman 2004) the themes encouraging greatest retention are explored. Central concepts of wellbeing (a broad concept relating to physical, mental and emotional health), individual, personal and organisational resilience coupled with organisational culture and leadership styles and capabilities are key, permitting this group to return and thrive. An individual perspective focused on resilience (the ability to bounce back from adversity) and specifically teacher resilience (Gu and Day 2013), organisational resilience, a growth mindset (Dweck 2017) and an experience of what it is to thrive within organisational internal and external structures are explored.

### Resilience

Organisationally, the research considers what best practice leadership behaviours would be in leading well for leaders and for teachers physically absent. Personal resilience and organisational resilience play a role in wellbeing. Resilience; the role of optimism, and as a personal resource, is important in driving wellbeing. From a psychological viewpoint, Fredrickson suggests that through a 'broaden and

build' concept positive emotions are stored acting as fuel to be later used for better coping and survival (2004). Gu and Day suggest that resilience is a 'construct that is relative, developmental and dynamic, connoting the positive adaptation and development of individuals in the presence of challenging circumstances' (2013: 1305). Resilience though is context sensitive, strengthened or diminished according to the nature of the setting within structural norms, the people and of individual qualities where commitment and resilience are found to be crucial to teachers' abilities to sustain effectiveness (Day et al 2006).

Individual resilience may be supported through self-determination (Deci and Ryan 2008) where internal motivation translates to job performance and high wellbeing. Possessing self-efficacy to manage tasks, situations and interpersonal relationships in school strongly influences levels of satisfaction with job conditions (Caprara et al 2003). Closely connected to satisfactory job conditions are the leadership behaviours shown (Bingham and Bubb 2017, 2021).

### **Organisational culture for wellbeing**

Organisational culture is significant in wellbeing, with securing employee wellbeing an important contributor to quality, performance and productivity while being key to reducing sickness absence and high turnover (Bingham and Bubb 2021). For leaders tasked with steering schools organisational resilience is needed:

An emergent property that develops in complex systems as precursor and response to stressors and risks. Understanding system resilience is a central part of organisational development and design practice, and a key strategic activity undertaken by leaders across the people profession. (Houghton, 2020)

An OECD report conceptualises teacher professionalism similarly to self-determination theory, as encompassing a teacher's knowledge base, peer networks and autonomy (TALIS OECD 2016). This same report included an England-only question on teachers' autonomy where 71% indicated that they do possess the autonomy they need to do a good job (Micklewright et al., 2014). This is pertinent in considering the autonomy afforded to individuals when isolated from collective networks.

### **Leadership styles and capabilities**

Meaning in work is also associated with wellbeing (Bingham and Bubb 2017) with close association between school leaders, staff commitment and job satisfaction. School leadership not only impacts on teacher professionalism but is aligned with

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giving teachers' meaningful communication and decision-making opportunities. Therefore school leadership, and in particular a transformative leadership style, is also connected to job commitment and job satisfaction (Cansoy 2019).

In unprecedented times, it appears vital to be accepting of and work with human frailties both physical and mental, underpinned by an understanding of what it is to lead authentically in schools. Compassionate leadership – modelling understanding, empathising and supporting have many positive outcomes for individuals, teams, organisations and systems (West et al 2017). Lack of leadership support may increase teacher stress as indicated in research of Canadian school principals (Lambersky 2016). Positive emotional support is essential for teacher effectiveness and hence for student achievement levels. Moreover, findings suggest that leaders' behaviours influence teacher morale, burnout, stress, commitment, and self and collective efficacy (ibid) helpful to this study.

In summary, a leader's role, behaviour and capability will be intrinsic to a school in post-pandemic recovery. Having enabling equitable structures both internal and external is important to fostering a positive return to shielding staff.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

A two-phase mixed methods approach of a survey and interviews probed perceptions and understandings. Sampling for interviews and survey was purposive and opportunist seeking teachers' and leaders' views from those self-identifying as having received official government shielding guidance or were doing so on behalf of others. As a small scale research study the preferred option of truly random sampling was unfeasible.

At the time, the DfE forbade any research in schools so sampling was through social media (LinkedIn, Twitter) and from the researcher's network. For both interviews and survey, only state school teachers and leaders working at English schools were invited to participate but from any type and school education phase (primary, secondary, special education) and any geographic location in England. The invitation to participate clearly indicated that the context was related to wellbeing and organisational culture and structure of their respective schools.

Thirteen interviews of teachers (T), leaders and executive heads (L) were conducted. Six leaders and heads from state schools, representing a leadership perspective, and seven teachers from only English state schools were interviewed on a one-to-one basis. Some schools were standalone, others were part of academy chains. Location was not a variable. The key variable was the shielding and

isolating element. Gender and age were not variables due to the limitations of obtaining participants in a pandemic.

Further data was collected through an online survey questionnaire designed as a Likert or rating scale (Robson 2011) whose questions were derived from the interview analysis, collecting wider data on key considerations for a return to work for individual and organisational understanding. It was piloted through social media over a three week duration.

The survey took place through an online form using social media (LinkedIn, Twitter) where from 25 completed surveys twelve self-reported as teachers, six as leaders and seven as either head teachers or executive heads. Although age and gender were requested, due to the constraints of completion during a pandemic, the data from these variables was insufficient to point to any clear emphasis.

The overall aim of both tools was gathering a snapshot of wellbeing, the strategic internal and external support and leadership behaviours required for a supportive return to school settings. For the interviews, school leaders and teachers were queried as to best practice and leadership practice, either from a teacher's perspective or from the perspective of leaders being led by other leaders. School leader participants are in roles of responsibility for running a school and for its strategic direction. As some of these teachers and leaders were both isolating and shielding they were able to illuminate this aspect in awareness of what behaviours leaders might manifest for the greatest wellbeing for this cohort. Leaders and teachers were treated as teachers in the survey analysis as they all shared a common characteristic of shielding for themselves or others. The interview responses yielded thicker descriptions (Miles and Huberman 1994) while findings supported a more incisive survey questionnaire. Interview data was analysed through thematic analysis gained from the constant comparative method (ibid), with reported findings anonymised. Survey data was analysed according to scales and ratings received.

#### **4. FINDINGS**

Four key themes emanated from both returned survey questionnaires and interview data. The reporting of both data findings is grouped. However, any specific differences or clarifications between teachers and leadership is reported only from the interviews where specific references are made to leaders' concerns as responsible with comments given by teachers (T), leaders and executive heads (L). Specific differences or continuities seen between the interviews and the survey are reported. The data from the survey permitted a wider understanding of the key areas and to a great extent supported the findings of the interviews.

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### 4.1. Wellbeing and workload

Anxiety, stress and emotions seen in the survey (n = 25) from being physically absent caused the highest response rate with the majority expressing stressful feelings. Moreover, the majority cited increased workload and similarly half reported over-compensating. Feelings of isolation affected over a third with another third affected by stress in using technology. A further six cite their wellbeing affected by non-specified areas. The survey ratings overall indicated a moderate increase in workload. Nonetheless, almost half reported a much higher or higher workload than before the pandemic with only four considering that their workload had much decreased, although from the survey it was not possible to identify if there were differences experienced between teachers and leaders. Linking additional workload to stress, over half (13) survey participants recorded increased workload as a reason for stress. Both survey and interview findings indicate an increase in workload. In particular, the interviews with leaders and executive heads evidenced higher workloads than teachers.

For an executive head supporting three schools, there was increased workload stress where the non-commuting time was used to work long days and in over-compensating. This appears to be a pattern in the interviews due to leaders' additional responsibilities:

Feeling guilty at not being *in situ*, so compensating. The team's workload has increased too. (L4)

For one head an initial reduction in stress changed:

Having to get all the updates from the news rather than the DfE; that is very stressful. There was a massive increase of work over Easter. (L5)

The move to online learning and communicating with students and parents precipitated a substantial workload:

Emails have increased ten-fold. Even though I'm only paid two days I'd say I work every day because I'm answering student's queries, phoning parents, doing videos and quizzes and trying to make it exciting and preparing the rest of it on Teams. But there are positives. Because I'm home it's a bit more relaxed. (T3)

Half of those surveyed felt under pressure, of being less valuable and a nuisance. For seven, job security was a concern. However, two people considered that they

had become more valuable through utilising different skills or in deploying their experience.

Well-being was affected in a myriad of ways:

Such as a better work life balance:

I felt awful for saying maybe this isn't all bad. For the first time since qualifying I had Friday night to Monday morning shut off... less stress. Everyone was in the same boat. But when everyone went back it was really different. I felt guilty for staying at home. I felt not very useful, less valuable, like I was missing out on the fulfilling side of teaching. (T1)

Some experienced a changing job role:

It is mentally draining, five hours per day on the phone. It can't be sustained – I've no-one to talk to after. I'm working on my own. (T2) (Teacher and counsellor).

It's very different from my day to day job. Lots of sitting still being inactive. I've been starting to feel fed up, a bit anxious, socially anxious, worried that I don't want people to think that I'm not working as hard as the teachers that are in school. I'm spending a lot of time on my own... normally I don't get to sit down all day. (T1)

There was relief:

It was a physical relief that I wasn't expected to go there until the thing blew over. (T3)

Stress due to caring responsibilities was seen:

Stress due to my Mum but worried about not being there. (T4)

The stress of being a shielder: I'm not aware of anyone else (shielding). It's difficult for others to understand. (T5)

Leaders in the main cited carrying much more additional stress than teachers. In the days leading up to closure and throughout the full or partial closure they grappled with a tsunami of information from the government and DfE, with managing staff wellbeing and the additional burden of managing at a distance:

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I had to make a decision (to close the school). I've never felt so alone. (L6)

One leader says age helps:

Yes, a bit stressed but I don't tend to get anxious. Age helps. My job is inherently stressful but I deal with it with strategies. The main area is losing control of the team – no corridor chats, looking in the classrooms, the non-verbal communication. (L2)

Another mentioned: I'm wracked with guilt over not being physically present. (L6)

Stress and anxiety were experienced in the leading up to the school closure and in dealing with very anxious members of staff and their close and extended families. (L1)

Connecting with family and friends was the mainstay of maintaining wellbeing followed by exercising, resting and improving immunity. Of equal importance were hobbies, using technology and making time for personal and professional development:

Walking the dog is a welcome release and exercise from the move to a sedentary role supporting students. (T1)

A teacher caring for elderly parents commented:

I feel very grateful the school gave me a part-time role so I can have the balance between the responsibilities. They're very sympathetic and that is great. (T4)

### **4.2. Leadership behaviours and capabilities**

Some schools were viewed as being ineffective in giving overall support but this was not unanimous. This somewhat negative view was particularly the case when set against direct line management support experienced. Nevertheless, the predominant view that specific senior level leadership support given to teachers and leaders had been reasonable, translated into a high response rate indicating they had received support and indeed some high levels of support. When transparent and supportive leadership was overall seen, there was high praise:

The Head is fab. He does care – a question of having a lot on their plates. (T1)

The head of department is really good. There's been newsletters and continual messages. Systems in place for a rota for key worker's children which obviously I couldn't do and they totally understood. (T3)

Some friction was evidenced:

So the negative side is there's been a divide and the teachers who have some medical issues and haven't come in, they've found it difficult. The government didn't announce all the criteria for the vulnerable. The Head Teacher decided who should not come in – there were lots of grumbles. (T4)

In the same vein, another said: vulnerability goes unheard of in school. (T5)

From the leader's perspective of support received, overall commendation was given. Albeit one leader expressed deep anxiety around: non-existent support from my line manager where there is no direct contact with the Executive Head. (L3)

Predominantly, compassionate, collaborative and distributive leadership was conducted. Directive leadership was less seen and adapting to the setting through contextual leadership was evidenced. Although teachers and leaders saw compassionate leadership and good support lines there was some comment around an absence: (L3)

Decision making in schools needs to reflect a kinder, compassionate approach. The pandemic has been an unknown and scary situation, so a compassionate approach helps to solidify trust (L3).

The significant stress on leaders in maintaining structures and systems was evident:

We have been monitoring all staff from school since before lockdown and keeping in contact with anyone shielding. The SLT have been very supportive and even lenient at the beginning but with wider opening this may lead to difficulties as we have tried our best to support our most vulnerable staff and families. (L1)

Two senior leaders commented on the real autonomy given in their role and the supportive trust environment, giving them room to manoeuvre and the accountability to be in charge.

Commenting on leadership style: It depends on what you're talking about as they don't have a style as such. They change style according to need. Their

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approach is ‘I know my school; I know what I am doing’. They might challenge me on a couple of points but essentially I’m in charge with full autonomy and accountability. (L5)

One leader (Executive Head, SEN school) reflected on the immense reserves and capabilities being drawn on:

I’m making brave decisions with clear leadership and uncharted decisions as well. The most stressful thing is running two organisations from my sofa and making decisions on my own, taking full responsibility for people’s lives. (L6)

### **4.2.2. *Communication with and from leadership of other leaders***

Related to leadership styles, the survey showed an equal split between participants feeling that communication from leadership had been supportive and those that did not, with an equal split reporting strong or very strong communication or contrastingly expressing dissatisfaction:

Yes, especially from my head teacher. I think he’s been amazing, really good. That’s his strength as a head teacher. He’s really good at comms with staff wellbeing. He really values his staff and wellbeing. (T1)

One teacher lamented a lack of communication but possessed the emotional intelligence to understand:

No-one phones to find out if I’m OK. The Head sends me a bulletin weekly. Personally not (feeling supported). I feel forgotten. No-one phoned me but it is a strong pastoral school and they’re busy. (T2)

A senior head evidenced strong communication:

Not only has the Trust leadership listened but it’s considered what is happening, real active listening rather than apparent listening. When I’ve brought problems they have helped find solutions. Given they’ve fifteen heads, the level of personalisation whilst maintaining consistency throughout the organisation I think has been excellent. It’s all I can ask for really. (L5)

### **4.3. Returning to school – retention and careers**

Two-thirds of surveyed respondents indicated some anxiety over returning to school feeling moderately safe in returning, with five expressing more confidence in safety measures and four more having less confidence. Nevertheless overall, the majority felt that their workplace has been sufficiently rigorous and robust in its

efforts to install protective security measures shown in higher rankings reporting confidence and high confidence in leadership. A smaller minority (eight) thought there was more to do. The overwhelming majority (23) would be physically returning to school. Regarding future proofing against a re-occurrence of Covid 19, although two-thirds were reasonably comfortable with measures taken, a third considered more steps were needed.

These findings correspond to the voices of teachers and leaders interviewed, who were putting their trust in their schools to follow the guidelines and in themselves to make necessary changes for their safety.

Overall, Covid-19 had had some effect on retention and planning for career change. Survey responses indicated that for over half (14) career plans remained unchanged but 11 had been influenced by the pandemic to re-consider career plans. One Executive Head recognised the impact of Covid-19 on recruitment but commented:

Career planning? I'd not really considered that. I'm happy with the three schools. (L4)

For one leader too, Covid had solidified their plans: It's reconfirmed my opinion to stay on. (L5)

How a career might be mediated by Covid-19 was seen in more than half (14) in the survey planning to remain in their current role with 11 reporting that they were leaving their role. Two were switching to part-time roles. Some reasons for change given were:

As a PPA teacher, where I am placed with the school has changed due to Covid and safety. (T4)

I was planning on applying for other roles at the start of 2020/21 but don't feel that this year has counted as a "proper" year of experience. (T5)

For some the pandemic had reinforced their views to stay or to retire.

No, I love what I do – I will carry on. If anything it has made me think I don't want to retire. Keeps my mind going and I get so much out of it. (T2)

I'm bringing forward retirement to avoid future exposure. (T6)

Overall, the extent to which leadership support had influenced career planning from the survey (n = 25) indicates that overall it has played no significant role with over two-thirds indicating that it had not, while less than a third indicated it had played some role although two felt most strongly that it had.

#### 4.4. Organisational security and wider external support

The effectiveness of external support structures centred on education unions and the Government. Two-thirds of survey respondents considered that the unions had addressed the considerable issues reasonably effectively but a substantial third cited a weak response.

Perceptions of UK Government effectiveness and support elicited the lowest average rating in the survey questions (1.88) from an overall average rating of 6.5/10. Just two respondents considered that the Government had been highly effective or very effective with three rating Government effectiveness and support as average. The remainder showed low levels of satisfaction with the Government with eleven giving the lowest rating and nine a low rating. In the interviews, many commented on the stress in receiving multiple and changing government updates, often through the media or from the Downing Street podium rather than from the DfE:

I think it's been pretty incoherent with a lot of knee jerk reaction. Lots of decisions seem made with very little thought or intelligence behind it. I've lost count of the number of updates we've had at 4pm on a Friday afternoon to be implemented on Monday morning. (L2)

Another senior leader expressed similarly with grave concern for staff wellbeing:

The cumulative exhaustion combined with the uncertainty and education policy being announced at the Prime Minister's podium address at 5 o'clock. That is quite exhausting and I know that my assistant heads will not be able to maintain it. There is cumulative fatigue and this is compounded. (L5)

A teacher commented on the difficult job leaders were doing:

I think the head and deputy have been looking at the policies. You could tell they didn't know what to say. We're not getting very much info from above. I would agree that it's been very tough to be a school leader. (T3)

## 5. DISCUSSION

Themes of wellbeing and workload, personal and organisational resilience, coupled with a positive enabling organisational culture and structure permitting shielding and isolating staff to return and thrive are central to the conceptual

contributions from the empirical evidence. Leadership is also a significant theme; the behaviours and capabilities shown by leaders and the leaders of the leaders themselves. The form of leadership played by government in providing effective educational security is pivotal.

### **Wellbeing and workload**

Although the survey did not quantify the workload of participants, teachers in England work longer hours than in most other countries. Full time teachers work an average of 48.2 hours per week – the third highest out of jurisdictions compared, 19 per cent longer than the average elsewhere (OECD 2017, 2020). Workload is recognised as unsustainable by the DfE with an adverse effect on wellbeing. Workload reduction in schools is an important component of the DfE's teacher recruitment and retention strategy.

Teacher development had continued apace with enthusiasm to adopt new workplace skills, re-visit old skills and teach remotely. Teachers sought to develop themselves personally signifying a positive mindset (Dweck 2017). The habit appears well embedded. Given little choice in having to develop remote teaching skills very rapidly they appeared to have enjoyed the new experience. Nonetheless, particularly for the newer teachers, this was not what they 'had signed up for' and relentless hours in front of a screen were more akin to having an office job. Having the space to develop personally and given the opportunities to learn is helpful for flourishing (Bingham 2017, Gaffney 2015) which in turn supports better wellbeing at times of uncertainty and the deep unknown. For Viktor Frankl (1992) meaning was found in purposeful work, love and courage in the face of difficulty. This view shows human capacity to make the best of the time available and reflects how teachers approached meaning making through purposeful work (Seligman 2006). However, the executive heads, heads and leaders experienced little or no time to concentrate on self-nourishment or in self-supporting.

Leaders of healthy schools pay attention to leadership promoting wellbeing. In a Danish study of elderly care employees in the healthcare sector, transformational or 'inspiring' leadership was found to be associated with both job satisfaction and wellbeing (Nielsen et al., 2009). However, this area is under-researched in education.

### **Developing personal and organisational resilience**

Resilience is both personal and contextual. Teachers and leaders in the study drew upon their own resources to maintain their wellbeing, showing character strengths and the ability to adapt to their circumstances in adversity (Gaffney 2015) evidencing resilience under pressure.

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Nevertheless, the long term sustainability of leaders in the face of continuing extreme pressure with no let up, having to adopt fortress leadership is worrying where working consistently at a pressured level has negative psychological effects (Bingham and Bubb 2017). The leaders and Executive Heads were drawing on immense reserves, taking a toll on their wellbeing concurring with other studies (ESP 2020). How might leaders re-set themselves faced with this ongoing situation? Drawing on wells of resilience is one way. However, this is only partially the answer in the light of the magnitude of a rarely faced external challenge.

There is work to be done by leaders in schools in developing teacher resilience (Gu and Day 2013), particularly in the vulnerable categories working through isolation and who have felt forgotten or given tasks they would not have taken on if they had been physically in school. Notwithstanding, it was clear that there was self-efficacy with an adaptive and flexible outlook to work in taking on new tasks. The findings showed it was not just those isolating who required support to develop further mental resilience. For example, younger teachers were left traumatised by swift school closures. Resilience, an emerging theory with different approaches, is based on risk. Resilient employees recover better and more quickly from disruptions than non-resilient employees. They are more adaptive and responsive to organisational changes (Shin et al 2012) and resilience supports improved performance. The value of resilience development is becoming recognised as an organisational tool in UK especially in the health sector and in other countries' public services (Harrop et al 2006, Gray 2016) and in some school communities. Australian research, drawing on teacher resilience literature, proposes a framework for building teacher education (Mansfield et al 2016) but resilience training in English school workforces is not yet widely adopted, although this is starting to change for new teachers. Leaders too need support to sustain working lives.

### **Leadership behaviours, capabilities and practices**

School leaders facing extreme circumstances could have adopted a command and control model in trying to re-balance the ship but largely they had not with a compassionate style of leadership seen. The importance of empathetic, caring and communicative leaders is clearly revealed. In terms of leadership capability, cultivating compassion seems important in navigating through the pandemic. Embedding compassionate and collaborative leadership and extending distributive leadership seen in this study helps to solidify trust, counteracting the ebbs and flows of the crisis. Leaders who expressed the most positivity in their isolation were themselves those that had been given room to manoeuvre; given the autonomy and accountability to be in charge. This had played a large role in supporting staff.

Leadership behaviours and cultural practices did not appear to have influenced career planning or decision-making for workplace retention. There was some evidence that teachers and leaders were considering alternative careers but also that they were adapting career planning. Leaders were not immediately planning on leaving; indeed views were reinforced. Those that knew that they might be leaving as part of their career planning would continue to do so but for some the pandemic had reinforced their view to stay or leaving was not considered. The toll on leaders over this period was significant with question marks around sustainability over the long duration. This concern is borne out by later surveys of heads where 59% of senior leaders have considered leaving the profession due to health and wellbeing pressures (ESP 2020) and in sustaining the continued workload and pressure (NAHT 2020). This clearly signals that leaders are now re-considering their futures on the education frontline.

### **Government effectiveness and support to address inequalities**

Perceptions of Government effectiveness and support to enable schools to cope well registered the lowest approval from teachers and leaders. This finding concurs with research indicating that the most anxiety coincided with government announcements such as the re-opening or wider re-opening of schools in September 2020 (ESP 2020).

An inequality was seen in dealing with difference and vulnerability of shielding staff. This stretched across the school system. The findings reveal a strong sense that the vulnerable and isolated can too easily be 'othered'. It was noted that the government did not announce all the criteria for the vulnerable leading to confusion and difficulties in putting schools' policies into place. Interestingly, those who had never perceived themselves as 'different' were now just that. This can quickly turn into a sense of marginalisation, as is the case with black and ethnic minority staff, whose ethnicity has made them more vulnerable to the pandemic. Changing the mindset and school policy making to adopt a wider view of inclusivity around workplace health, recognising vulnerabilities such as age (Bingham 2019) and ethnicity would support the adoption of more inclusive workplace practice by leaders and school governors. Adaption of inclusive and diversity policies should be emanating from the DfE at government policy level and institutionalised at school governance levels. Positive communication relaying adapted policy from leadership would signal improvement in this regard.

Organisational security is pivotal but there needs to be trust in the leadership (Bryck and Schneider 2002, Fink 2016) to respond to the exigencies of health and security mandated by Government. The findings indicated a well of trust that

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the workplace was safe to return to and that leaders had followed the plethora of public health guidelines.

In summary, this paper portrays how the wellbeing of shielded school staff in England might affect attitudes towards workforce retention and to what extent leadership behaviours and practices can support a positive and ‘thriving’ return to work in a post-Covid-19 environment for effective schools. Different forms of headship through developing more flexible working or increased job share to reduce burnout would appear sensible in the face of renewed pandemics. Developing a whole school approach around compassionate leadership and a wellbeing agenda to include resilience training would support sustainability for those vulnerable through shielding and better support younger less experienced teachers. Health vulnerabilities (including age and ethnicity) in the workplace now need to be on the government agenda both in government policy making and in school strategic policy, where currently there is system inequity.

The findings explore aspects of leading schools effectively in extraordinary circumstances and how gaps in leadership and structural inequalities might be strategically addressed. Implications for leading and managing schools in a current and post-Covid-19 landscape organisationally, of value to school leadership and governance, are presented. Some steps for best practice in as yet a very little researched area are suggested. This study could be a precursor to a wider study on understanding teacher and leader wellbeing and resilience in post-pandemic recovery.

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