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Rising to the Challenge of Creating Equitable, Inclusive, and Compassionate School Communities in the Recovery Phase of the Pandemic: The Role of Aspiring Headteachers

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Abstract: Concerns have been raised globally about the impact of the pandemic on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people (CYP). How prospective headteachers rose to the challenge posed by the pandemic in supporting the wellbeing of their school communities and reaching out to the most vulnerable CYP and families during the recovery phase is the focus of this paper. It is a longitudinal, principally qualitative study conducted in two phases with 60 former students of the Into Headship programme in Scotland. Phase 2 of the study drew on the accounts of eight students drawn from the primary, secondary, and special education sectors using individual interviews and focus group discussions. This paper draws on the accounts of three secondary sector participants in interview. Data were analysed via thematic analysis using a modified framework of King and Horrocks. The respondents had encountered a wide range of challenges and had been highly proactive in their approach through adopting both targeted and universal approaches to meeting need and addressing inequalities. The findings of this paper should inform the development of headship preparation programmes globally and the responses of schools in the recovery phase, furthering our understanding as to what constitutes inclusion in education.

Keywords: inclusion; education; inclusive education; international; global; pandemic; wellbeing; social justice; school leadership; headship preparation

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1. Introduction

1.1. The Impact of the Pandemic on Children and Young People

The challenge of creating equitable, inclusive, and compassionate school communities lies at the heart of school leadership. Such communities are characterised by care, compassion, and concern for all members of the school community, removing barriers to participation and creating an ethos in which all children and young people (CYP) are valued for who they are; in which CYP are not discriminated against through disability, race, ethnicity, gender, or poverty (or any other characteristic); and in which a sense of belonging is fostered [1]. The pandemic had a catastrophic effect on the lives of many CYP across the globe, amplifying and exacerbating inequalities across the world [1–10]. UNICEF [7] poses the question: "The world stands at a crossroads. We have a decision to make. Do we rally and unite to protect years of progress on child rights? Or do we allow the unequal recovery from COVID-19 to further marginalize the disadvantaged and increase inequality even more?" (p. 2).

Concerns have been raised globally about the impact on the mental health and wellbeing of CYP [7,8,11]. The fragility of support systems for children and the disproportionate effects of the hardships experienced by the most disadvantaged are highlighted in the first global *State of the World Report* to focus on the mental health and wellbeing of children [8]. In England, a correlation was established between periods of restriction and behavioural, emotional, and attentional difficulties in children which, even when restrictions were eased, were still in evidence for those who had been identified as having *Special Educational Needs and Disabilities* (SEND) and those from low-income families [1,12] and this has remained constant even thirty months beyond the onset of the pandemic [13].

The above pose significant challenges for schools and their leadership teams as schools navigate their way through COVID-19 recovery.

1.2. Inclusion in Education Understood through the Lens of Social Justice and Equity

Key developments in the field of inclusive education have seen a shift away from it being perceived as the locus of intervention for specific groups of CYP, particularly those regarded as having SEND, towards it being concerned with all learners, expressed in the declaration of every learner matters and matters equally [14–16]. The *Incheon Declaration*, agreed at the *World Forum on Education* in May 2015 and leading to the *Education 2030 Framework for Action*, commits the education community to meeting *Sustainable Development Goal 4* (SDG4) which aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" [17]. An important message to emerge from the UNESCO [16] *Guide for Ensuring Inclusion and Equity in Education* is the goal of "seeing individual differences not as problems to be fixed, but as opportunities for democratizing and enriching learning," (p. 13), thus moving away from deficit perspectives of CYP.

Many commentators have sought to bring clarity to the field of inclusive education through defining its characteristics (e.g., [18–20]. The UNESCO *Global Education and Monitoring Report: Inclusion and Education* [20] defines inclusion in terms of "securing and guaranteeing the right of all children to access, presence, participation and success in their local regular school" and "eliminating barriers to access, presence, participation, and achievement" (p. 8). For Slee [20], inclusion is historically and socio-culturally situated (rooted in customs, traditions, and practices) and therefore must be understood globally as being located within geopolitical and cultural contexts. Likewise, Ainscow [15] argues that inclusion means different things to different people—there is no single national perspective on inclusion and practice cannot be generalised across countries without consideration of local contexts and meanings.

Norwich [21] argues that the multiple ways in which the term is understood adds to its ambiguity [1]. Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson [18] have created a typology of inclusion which encompasses inclusion for specific groups of learners (e.g., those identified as having SEND), broader groups of learners (e.g., all CYP who are vulnerable to exclusion), and all learners [1]. Of the last of these, they describe a principled approach to education and society, reflected within the UNESCO *Policy Guidelines for Inclusive Education* [22] concerned with addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all children.

However, how the term 'needs' is understood is by no means straightforward, nor is the relationship between inclusion in education and the language of special needs in its various guises. It has been argued [23–26] that the two concepts are, at best, incompatible with each other, and, at worse, the latter, in promulgating deficit perspectives of CYP, is contrary to the values of inclusion in education which seeks to promote diversity and the innate worth and value of each individual, challenging dichotomies of "mainstream-special, able-disabled," and "normal-other" [26].

It has been long argued within the field of inclusive education that there is a need for transformational change if schools are to become truly inclusive in their practice. This is dependent on high-quality leadership at all levels of the system which puts equity, social justice, and children's rights at its heart.

1.3. Leading in Times of Crisis

Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou [27] observe that crisis management has been largely neglected within the field of educational leadership, evidenced by a scarcity of empirical research. In a systematic literature review, narrowed down to 42 empirical studies, they describe the pandemic as a shared global experience and a public education crisis which, within the context of extremely uncertain, complex, and ambiguous circumstances, disrupted traditional school leadership practices. Many of the challenges faced by school leaders were logistical in nature (e.g., the lack of infrastructure and technological equipment to support home learning). The degree to which school leaders were able to ensure equity and access of provision for learners depended on a range of factors, such as building expertise in digital literacy and monitoring the progress of pupils. Organisational challenges related also to ensuring the physical, emotional, and mental health of the school community striving towards survival.

School leaders drew on a wide range of strategies, geared towards the different phases of the pandemic:

1. Sensemaking;
2. Prioritisation of safe schooling and digital learning whilst providing for the psychosocial wellbeing of the school community;
3. Building resilience through team building, connectedness, belongingness, and relational trust;
4. Drawing on their personal qualities, values, and skills to make effective decisions;
5. Promoting a positive school culture;
6. Promoting effective communication and collaboration amongst the school community;
7. Leading for equity and ensuring digital inclusion;
8. Drawing on wider professional networks;
9. Evidencing care, empathy, and self-reliance in meeting the socio-psychological needs of the school community;
10. Adopting a proactive approach looking towards addressing crisis in the future;
11. Managing risk and maximising risk-reduction in the absence of set guidance.

Drawing on distributive, collegial, and collaborative modes of leadership enabled senior leaders to respond effectively and efficiently to the pandemic, creating a sense of belongingness towards the adoption of a collective response.

Fullan [28] argues that schools leaders became 'de-skilled' as they sought to make sense of a swiftly changing landscape, characterised by chaos and uncertainty. However, he maintains that the pandemic, whilst exposing the fault lines already present in education systems across the world, also offers the opportunity for schools to become transformational agents of society. As schools emerge from the pandemic, Sahlberg [29] cautions for the need to not only envision a 'new normal' but to focus on the 'how' and 'why' of change rather than just the 'what,' as otherwise schools will most likely revert towards the status quo, particularly within the context of tightening budgets. For him, it is about empowering the school community (the visionary leadership of principals, professional wisdom of teachers, and passionate engagement of students) rather than being over-reliant on policy to drive change [1].

Harris and Jones [30] observe that, at a time when there were no precedents or blueprints to steer school leaders through the pandemic, relational trust and context responsive leadership, dependent on distributive forms of leadership, drawing on the strengths of the community, come to the fore. In a small-scale study across the four nations of the UK, Beauchamp et al. [31] explore headteachers' strategic and operational responses to mitigating the impact of the initial stages of the pandemic. The authors describe how, despite the differing policy contexts in the four nations and the situational ambiguity created by external pressures and the fast-changing operational context, the "values, attitudes and moral imperatives of headteachers invoked a strong sense of emotional leadership of all members of the school community" (p. 388). The rapid development of relationships with staff, pupils, and parents, underpinned by trust and fairness, communication, a strong moral imperative, adaptive leadership modelling as befits the situation, and distributive approaches, underpinned their approach, whilst maintaining their own resilience.

Through examination of a case study school, Mitchell et al. [32] explore the changing role of the headteacher in Scottish education from the perspective of Middle Leaders (Principal Teachers and Faculty Heads) and through interrogation of the policy landscape, with a specific focus on social justice. They maintain that, in Scotland, the pandemic has challenged and extended constructions of school leadership and professional learning. Whilst headship is understood in different ways internationally, the pandemic has the potential to steer constructions of headship away from narrow conceptualisations, hierarchical in nature, which focus on administration (often reflected in the titles given to school leaders), towards leadership seen as a collaborative and distributive venture with a focus on capacity building and relational leadership, building community to support transformative education (p. 199).

Schechter et al. [33], drawing on previous research focussing on leading in times of crisis, identify eight principles for leading in a pandemic. They claim that the pandemic can act as a catalyst for driving long-term organisational processes. In a similar vein, Watt [10] argues that there should be no build back to normal post-pandemic. Drawing on the *Global Education and Monitoring Report: Inclusion and Education*, he advocates that the route out of COVID-19 should rest on transformational change which eliminates structural and institutional barriers, whilst targeting resources towards the marginalised and disadvantaged. Such an approach requires inclusive leaders who build on the principles of equity. Hughes et al. [34], likewise, make the case for collaborative action around issues of equity and justice. Leask and Younie [35] argue that a key imperative as schools emerge from the pandemic is the political will to seize opportunities to provide access to high-quality education for all.

It becomes evident that, whilst the pandemic has presented as a significant challenge for senior leaders in schools, it also presents as a time of opportunity for transformative change at the systems and school level.

1.4. The Focus of This Paper

This paper draws on the accounts of three former students on the Into Headship (IH) programme, Depute Headteachers in secondary schools serving pupils aged 12–18 in Scotland, as they supported their school communities in the recovery period beyond the initial lockdown in the spring/early summer of 2020. It focusses on the challenges met and approaches adopted, particularly, but not exclusively, in supporting vulnerable families with the aim of informing headship preparation programmes more widely as schools emerge from the pandemic.

1.4.1. Into Headship

IH is a Masters-level programme delivered within a single academic year in partnership with Education Scotland, the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS), and local authorities. The focus of the course is strategic leadership, with students scoping and undertaking a Strategic Change Initiative within their school and evaluating themselves against the Professional Standard for Headship. Delivery of the course varies from university to university, taking account of locale, but key aspects are taught sessions delivered by university providers, online modules and an emotional inventory for which Education Scotland is responsible, and mentoring and professional verification provided by local authorities. The programme was evaluated in 2022 by Alma Harris and was declared worthy of international recognition. The qualification is now compulsory for appointment to a full-time headship post in Scottish schools.

Lying at the heart of the professional standards for teachers in Scotland are the professional values of social justice, trust, respect, and integrity. Social justice is defined within the Standard for Headship as “the view that everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities now and in the future”. The standard sets out a set of criteria to be met to realise this goal, including “embracing global educational and social values of sustainability, equality, equity and justice, and recognising children’s rights” [36] (p. 4).

1.4.2. Study Aims

The first phase of the study sought to explore the response of former and current IH students to supporting their school communities during the initial lockdown in the UK. The second phase, the focus of this paper, explores:

I. The challenges faced by former students on the IH programme in supporting the school community as schools have gradually phased back to more normal practice, with a specific focus on socio-emotional wellbeing;
II. The nature and perceived efficacy of measures that have been put in place to support:
    (a) Pupil and staff wellbeing;
    (b) Pupils living in disadvantaged circumstances or who are otherwise disadvantaged, including engagement with their families;
III. Lessons that have been learned from the pandemic regarding:
    (a) Policy and practice in schools;
    (b) The national response to COVID-19 recovery;
    (c) The role of headship;
    (d) The efficacy of the IH programme and its impact on practice during times of crisis.

1.5. The Scottish Context

Scottish education policy is a devolved function of the UK government and, as such, is distinctive from that of the rest of the UK. Two key Scottish policies are *Curriculum for Excellence (CfE)*, spanning ages 3–18, at the heart of which are four capacities—successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens, and effective contributors—and *Getting it Right for Every Child* (GIRFEC). GIRFEC is a holistic, inter-agency approach towards meeting the needs of CYP. The *Scottish Attainment Challenge* (SAC), fashioned on the *London Challenge*, was launched in 2015 and, through a series of funding streams, has sought to close the poverty-related attainment gap (for a critique of the SAC, see Mowat [37]). The *National Framework for Inclusion* (3rd ed.) aligns with the agenda for inclusive practice, the *Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act (2004)* and subsequent amendments to it, and with the GTCS professional standards. The aforementioned Act defines Additional Support Needs as applying "to children or young people who, for whatever reason, require additional support, in the long or short term, in order to help them make the most of their school education and to be included fully in their learning," with a wide range of categories of CYP who may require additional support identified, both temporary and permanent, such as those with "who have a learning difficulty . . . " or "have experienced a bereavement" [38].

Scottish schools experienced significant disruption during the pandemic (c.c. Figure 1). There were two national lockdowns with schools gradually phasing back using a blended learning model. Even when pupils returned to school, due to infection, whole schools, year groups, or classes had to isolate at home from time to time and schools had to cope with high rates of staff absence. The strictures and social distancing posed by the pandemic created severe logistical problems for senior leaders, particularly in secondary schools. The initial moderation processes put in place by the Scottish Qualification Authority (SQA) in lieu of formal examinations—the *Alternative Certification Model* (ACM)—proved to be highly contentious, leading to a change in policy towards assessing grades based on teacher judgement. Following the publication of a commissioned OECD review of *Curriculum for Excellence* in 2021, and subsequent independent review of assessment and qualifications [39], a better balance between internal and external assessment with fewer examinations in the senior phase (Secondary 4–6, ages 15–18) has been recommended.

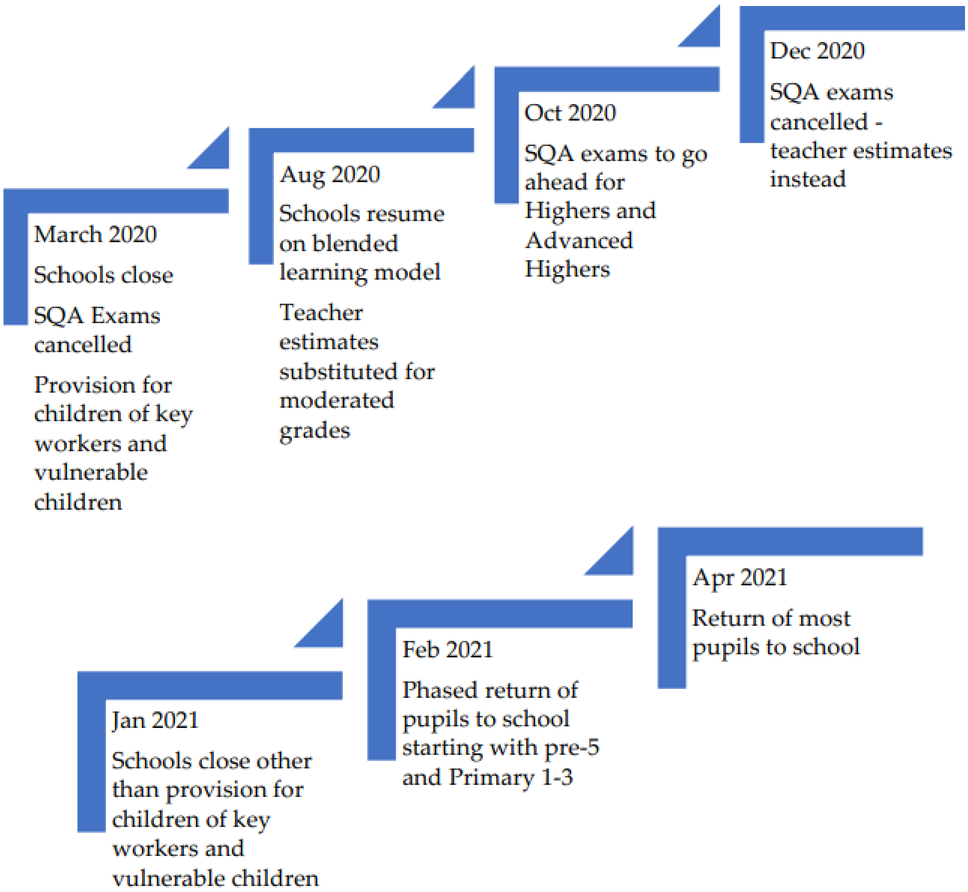

Figure 1. Timeline of key events associated with the lockdowns of schools in Scotland.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Phase 1 of the Study

The first phase of this longitudinal, qualitative study constitutes an online survey based on an open-ended questionnaire administered to three cohorts of Into Headship students conducted in June 2020 towards the end of the first lockdown in the UK. The survey, to which 60 students responded (around 50% rate), focussed principally on the challenges faced by participants as they supported their school communities during lockdown, the approaches adopted, and their perceived efficacies. Six broad themes emerged from this phase of the study which, modified, formed the foundation for analysis of Phase 2: quality (home) learning; the mental health and wellbeing of the school community; school ethos, climate, sense of belonging, connectedness and community; inclusive practice; school leadership; and communication (the last of these incorporated within school leadership for Phase 2).

2.2. Phase 2 of the Study

Phase 2, conducted in December 2022/January 2023, focusses on the period beyond the initial lockdown in the spring/early summer of 2020 and, drawing from the findings of Phase 1, has a specific focus on the wellbeing of the school community. It was conducted via individual interviews with eight respondents to the initial survey, drawn from the secondary, primary, and special education sectors, and three focus group discussions which were sector-specific. An open invitation to participate was offered to all respondents to the survey who had expressed a willingness to take part. Criteria were established for the selection of the sample:

- Sector;
- Role within the school;

- Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) status. (the SIMD aggregates data from seven domains to classify data zones into ten deciles, decile 1 being the most deprived. https://www.gov.scot/collections/scottish-index-of-multiple-deprivation-2020/, accessed on 11 April 2023);
- Status of the school;
- Urban/rural status of the school.

The demographic of participants and their schools is set out in Table 1. Each participant has been allocated a code to ensure anonymity.

Table 1. Demographic of participants and their schools.

Sector	Role	Code	SIMD Status	Urban/Rural
Pre-5/Primary	Headteacher	PK	Around 40% in SIMD 1 and 2	Urban
Pre-5/Primary	Depute Headteacher	PT	Around 30% in SIMD 1 and 2	Urban
Pre-5/Primary	Headteacher	PC	Around 50% in SIMD 1 and 2	Urban/rural
Secondary	Depute Headteacher/Acting Headteacher	SL	Around 20% in SIMD 1 and 2	Urban
Secondary	Acting Depute Headteacher	SD	Around 40% in SIMD 1 and 2	Urban
Secondary	Depute Headteacher	SM	Mainly SIMD 4–7 but with pockets of hidden poverty	Urban
Special Education (Social, Emotional, and Behavioural Needs)	Depute Headteacher	SpEdS	Varies across the seven sites within the local authority but around 80% or more living in SIMD 1 and 2	Urban/rural
Special Education (Severe and Complex Needs)	Depute Headteacher	SpEdK	Around 20% in SIMD 1 and 2	Urban/rural

Please note that, in Scotland, Deputy Headteachers are known as Depute Headteachers, Depute Heads or, simply, Deputes.

The interviews, using an interview schedule (c.c. Appendix A.1), were based on the personal experiences of the participants and the approaches adopted by their schools during the recovery phase of the pandemic, whereas the focus group discussions have a broader focus on policy and practice at national and local levels. Both had a focus on leadership in times of crisis, the role of the headteacher in supporting the school community, and the implications for headship preparation programmes. The interviews and focus group discussions were conducted online, recorded, and then transcribed.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed by thematic analysis. A hybrid approach was adopted, derived from the model developed by King and Horrocks [40] (c.c. Figure 2) but modified as described below.

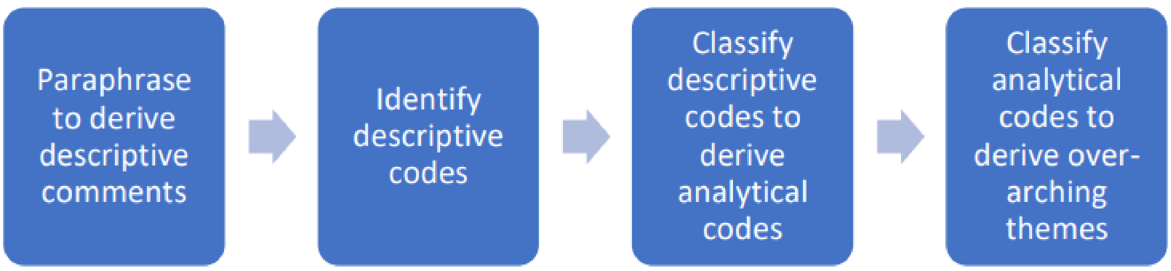

Figure 2. Illustration of King and Horrocks' model.

On the basis that the issues encountered are distinctive for each sector, initially data are being analysed for each sector prior to being synthesised across the dataset as a whole to arrive at overarching themes (c.c. Figure 3). In effect, each sector could be regarded as a stand-alone case study in its own right but which, when integrated, across the dataset, provides a complete picture. As previously intimated, the analysis for this paper and the following discussion are focussed on the data for the secondary sector only.

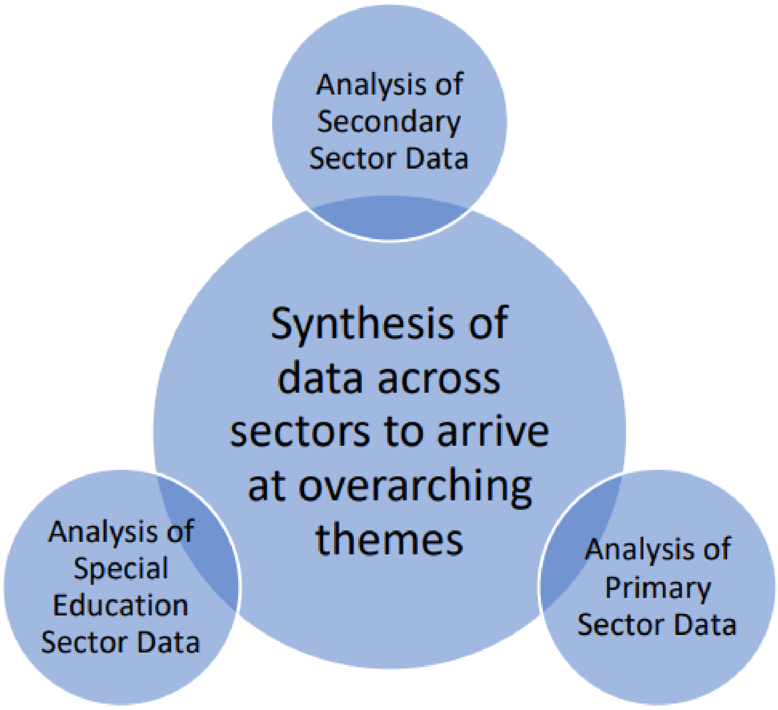

Figure 3. Illustration of stages of analysis.

Descriptive comments were generated from each of the transcripts and an identifier given to each response to each question (c.c. Appendix A.2). A summary of each transcript was produced along with key messages (c.c. Appendix A.3) and these were then returned to participants for verification. The descriptive comments and identifiers were copied and pasted into the first two columns of a template and descriptive codes were generated thereafter in an inductive process, classified under the five key themes generated for Phase 1 (c.c. Appendix A.4) such that comparisons can be made between the data sets. Analytical codes were then generated through classification of descriptive codes, but, rather than waiting until all descriptive codes had been generated, analytical codes were developed and modified on an ongoing basis for each question as patterns became evident, as illustrated graphically in Appendix A.5. This is a much more complex and creative process than that set out above in Figure 2, but it allows for a much deeper interrogation of the data—what is it really telling us in relation to our key themes generated from Phase 1? For this reason, programmes such as NVivo were rejected, as they did not afford freedom to be creative in this manner.

3. Results

The discussion, drawing on the perspectives of the three secondary participants in interview, is framed around the modified key themes which emerged from Phase 1 of the study.

3.1. Supporting Quality Learning

3.1.1. Engagement in Learning

All three participants had observed significant changes in pupils' engagement with learning in the recovery period. SD observed that, whilst it had been anticipated that pupils who had not engaged well with learning prior to the pandemic on return to school might be less settled, manifesting itself in behavioural issues for some, what had not been anticipated was the effect on pupils who had previously been well-motivated—" . . . and staff were saying, you know, 'What's going on?' and, 'We see a massive change'". A key challenge for the school had been supporting children to re-engage with their learning and to interact with their friends to build relationships. She was concerned that children had missed out on early learning experiences which would impact on them as they come through the system. SL considered that there had been an under-estimation of the impact of lockdown on pupils from stable homes. She was concerned that the measures put in place to replace formal examinations had led to pupils being over-assessed, placing additional stress on them and leading to a decline in behaviour and motivation.

SM indicated that the school had built on the positives arising from engagement with digital technologies to support learning during lockdown and the growing confidence of staff in using them, resulting in some learners being in a good position to resume learning within the school environment post-lockdown—to "hit the ground running". However, the lack of socialisation during lockdown, coupled with ongoing health issues and the impact of bereavement for some, had an enduring effect on the capacity of CYP to interact with peers and teachers and on their confidence and sense of self-efficacy, affecting classroom dynamics and, ultimately, learning (SM). This had resulted in senior pupils, in general, not performing as well as might otherwise have been the case in preliminary examinations.

3.1.2. Monitoring and Tracking of Pupil Progress

Given the universal concerns about lost learning, a key imperative for secondary schools has been the monitoring and tracking of pupil progress. SD highlighted difficulties in tracking the progress of children where attendance was sporadic due to COVID-19-related absences. To address this, the school had made use of digital technologies to support learning and to gather information through questionnaires about pupil wellbeing and their attitudes towards returning to school. This allowed for the identification of pupils in need of additional support and enhanced monitoring.

SM recognised the dynamic nature of pupil support and the need for staff to be on the alert for CYP who may be experiencing difficulties for the first time, as well as supporting those with long-term needs. The school had established efficient monitoring and tracking systems prior to the pandemic which, together with developing relationships with CYP and families, had enabled them to meet the needs of CYP more effectively and to develop an understanding of some of the reasons behind the underperformance of senior pupils.

3.1.3. Moderation and Internal Assessment

A key challenge for secondary schools was posed by the abrupt change to national assessments for senior pupils and the constantly shifting policy guidance offered to schools in this regard. A balance had to be struck between gathering evidence of course work (in itself, a significant challenge), conducting internal assessments, and maintaining the integrity of the qualification, while ensuring equitable practice—" . . . we had to make sure that we . . . weren't compromising our own integrity because we were concerned, you know, did we have the right evidence to make sure these CYP got what they deserved?" (SL).

3.1.4. Learning and Families: Support for Learning within the Home

At a time when home learning came into such sharp focus, SD was clear that supporting CYP was a team effort that starts with parents. However, the quality of support for home learning was variable " . . . due to a range of circumstances, such as poverty, the parent's level of education, not all parents are well-placed to support learning". She highlighted the need for professional development of staff to raise awareness of the impact of poverty on children's learning and the capacity of the home to support learning.

3.2. The Mental Health and Wellbeing of the School Community

3.2.1. The Mental Health and Wellbeing of Pupils

Concerns around Attendance

All three participants expressed concerns about pupil attendance post-lockdown. SD was worried that separation anxiety would affect the attendance of some pupils, particularly those who are identified as having *Additional Support Needs* (ASN), who are prone to anxiety, living in poverty and/or where carers have mental health issues. The bonding of CYP with their parents during lockdown and sense of protection towards them was a key factor. For those CYP who, pre-pandemic, had poor attendance, their attendance post-lockdown was sporadic, and they struggled to attend school. Safety concerns around transmission of infection added to the problem—"And their parents would . . . contact the school to say, 'Well, you know, I'm no (sic) sending them because I'm scared in case they get COVID and bring it back tae the house'" (SD). Absence was seen as a more deeply rooted problem, located in family circumstances.

SL had encountered similar difficulties. With more families working from home, it had been easier for some pupils to be off school. The messaging from the school during the pandemic had been of the nature of "It's fine, you know, we can do this. We can cover the work. We can do this for you"—but now a different message is being given that school is a better environment for learning, giving mixed messages to parents. The school had recognised the need to adopt a more creative and proactive approach, creating bespoke learning packages and alternative curricula for CYP and increasing visits from Home School Partnership Officers and Pupil Support Staff to homes.

Through the school's tracking system, SM had identified welfare issues that lay at the heart of poor attendance and underachievement, acknowledging that it is not the data themselves that are important but what is done with them. The school had redefined the roles of the pupil support team, allowing for greater scrutiny of attendance and of pupils considered to be at risk, whilst building on the relationships with parents and carers that had formed during lockdown. A part-time member of staff was appointed with a specific responsibility for the welfare of Care Experienced CYP as there is a legal responsibility to report on their attainment and attendance.

Access to Mental Health Services

There was recognition of the need for CYP to have access to professional mental health services. However, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) were overwhelmed with three-to-six month waiting periods beyond initial referral. SM felt that, for those CYP whose needs were urgent, the school could not afford not to act.

Responding to Need through Individualised or Targeted Support

School Counselling Service

All three participants valued the school counselling service which had been implemented in all secondary schools by the Scottish Government. SM reported that the school had expanded the service by funding a further counsellor, which has allowed the service to encompass a broader spectrum of need, supporting between 30–40 pupils. This, along with other measures, had resulted in a reduction in waiting times for access to support. SD found that the school counselling service had been a very positive experience for pupils who could self-refer to it.

Low-Intensity Anger Management (LIAM) Programme

Both SD and SM discussed the impact of a Low-Intensity Anger Management (LIAM) programme within their schools (a one-to-one intervention which is delivered in-house by teachers who have been trained by NHS CAMHS staff) and aspects of its operation. SM described it as a form of triage which, if done successfully, can limit the number of CYP requiring counselling or mental health services/facilities. Two teachers had been trained in the approach in SD's school and another member of staff had been shadowing Educational Psychologists working with a group of CYP.

Nurture Base and Wellbeing Area

Nurture has become an increasing feature of Scottish schools, and this was the case for all three participants. SM and SD talked about the affordances of the nurture group in offering a safe space for CYP—" . . . that ability for them to go in and sit down and have a cup of tea or coffee, have a relaxed space, have a quiet space". SD had found that the need for the base had grown in response to the pandemic. However, SM was concerned that it could lead to overdependence, making it more difficult to reintegrate pupils back into the classroom. SM acknowledged that the function of the nurture space must be clear and its role within the school understood. Tensions had arisen when pupils attending the nurture base had created disruption for other classes.

> They can go and go for a walk to calm down. But the difficulty with that is they walk round the school, they disrupt classes. Staff see that in a different way, and I suppose it's just trying to come up with a system that works well. (SM)

Given the constraints of the school timetable, a variant of the nurture approach was adopted with pupils attending the base for specific periods of time. A wellbeing area staffed by volunteers and constituting a large space with four offset rooms for quieter space or targeted work had been established in SM's school. Staff either direct pupils towards subject-based work or engage them in intensive sessions with the aim of reintegrating them back into the classroom.

Responding to Need through Universal Support

Nurture As a Whole-School Approach

SD described how the school had placed an emphasis on nurture principles, focussing particularly on the understanding of behaviour as a form of communication. For her, nurture training is a whole-school approach which is not just directed towards targeted CYP but a universal support and a consistent approach to pedagogy and the whole classroom. Through Career-Long Professional Learning (CLPL) (the term adopted by Education Scotland for professional learning), awareness had been raised of developmental issues, the language that is appropriate to use with CYP and recognition that they may be operating at a level that is not commensurate with their chronological age. To ensure sustainability and build capacity, a cascade model of professional development had been implemented within the local authority and school. The school has been able to demonstrate the impact of nurture through creating case studies for parents.

Wellbeing at the Heart of the School and What It Stands For

All three participants stressed that wellbeing lay at the heart of the school. SL highlighted the importance of providing opportunities for pupils to be able to share their experiences of lockdown and its impact on them, validating their feelings and emotions. However, it had had a significant impact on staff time. To counteract this, the school had implemented a peer-support programme of health and wellbeing ambassadors.

Partnerships and Wider Engagement with the School Community

DM intimated that the school had initially adopted a targeted approach to meeting pupil need, drawing on Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) and other measures, but this became too labour- and resource-intensive. The school then explored universal supports for pupils and families, looking to access supports beyond the school setting. A health and wellbeing event involving partnership organisations was organised to engage with parents and the wider community, with organisations able to offer practical advice and support to CYP and their parents.

3.2.2. The Mental Health and Wellbeing of Staff

The impact of COVID-19 and the additional work created by it, the cost-of-living crisis, and the pressures and stresses of work have all created a situation where staff are at greater risk of mental health issues. This situation was further exacerbated by the pressure of preparing pupils for the SQA exams (SM). During lockdown, senior leaders had communicated regularly with Faculty Heads asking them to be alert to members of staff who had been struggling. However, since the return of pupils to school, support for staff wellbeing had not been at the forefront and had taken a backward step. It was becoming an increasing issue for staff, with some presenting with mental health issues—anxiety and stress—leading the school to recognise that this is an area which requires attention.

SD intimated that there had been initial concerns about the wellbeing of staff who were shielding for health reasons, but they were supported very effectively by the local authority. SL commented on the significant strain on pupil support staff as they endeavoured to meet the high level of pupil need on a one-to-one basis post-lockdown. Some staff to whom it had been suggested that they took up the local authority offer of counselling had failed to do so. She considered that this might have been due to the stigma attached to mental health issues and concerns about what others might think. In her view, this service, offered by external providers, was not as effective as it could have been, despite it being well-publicised.

A range of measures had been put in place to support staff wellbeing in the three schools. In SD's school, questionnaires were issued to staff regarding their wellbeing and those who were identified as struggling received support. SM talked about the value of drawing on external partnerships in gaining a new perspective and deriving benefit from professional training for staff who may be delivering on wellbeing aspects of the curriculum but who may also be experiencing issues themselves. For some staff, this has led to a heightened awareness of their own mental health issues, which presented a challenge to school leaders in meeting those needs.

In SL's school the first in-service day post lockdown had been devoted to a staff welfare day, with funding having been obtained to lay on a range of staff activities. A lunch was provided so that staff could share their experiences and feel validated.

> I know that some people can say, you know, wellbeing's more than about . . . one day of doing yoga and it absolutely is. But the feedback that staff gave from that day was just that recognition of, you know, having that lovely big lunch together and, and feeling appreciated and that recognition that we'd had a really hard time.

3.2.3. Support for and Engagement with Families & YP Considered to Be More Vulnerable Safeguarding of Pupils

SD observed that not all CYP live in a safe environment. Even beyond lockdown, consideration had to be given to safeguarding issues, particularly when some children spent long periods of time alone in their bedrooms online. Wider factors relating to the home environment had been exacerbated by the pandemic, such as domestic abuse, job loss, or insecurity, leading to behavioural issues at school. Their school counselling service offered a confidential setting for CYP but, if a child protection issue were to emerge, this would need to be relayed.

Communication and Engagement with Families

SD stressed the importance of having positive communications with families, keeping parents and carers informed of their child's progress and celebrating success—"When you do this, it has a ripple effect into the home—when there is a difficulty at school and parents have a go at the child, it creates a vicious circle". SM was concerned about deficit perspectives of families by staff, which can lead to a negativity around communication with parents. Drawing on Pupil Equity Funding, the school had appointed a family liaison officer to act as a single point of contact for families. The school is working on a communication strategy with parents which, if successful, will relieve pressure on the family liaison officer and free up to time to work with families with whom there had been frequent contact during lockdown.

SM observed that, whilst there is a consistent programme of support for CYP, there was a need to review the programmes that the school had to support families, particularly those that were hard to reach and disengaged. Recognising that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to meet the needs of all pupils, he felt that having close relationships with families allowed the school to target support towards CYP and pick up on those who had not initially presented with problems.

Mitigating Financial Pressures and Offering Support to Families

SM observed that their school was highly aware of the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on families, drawing on the *Cost of the School Day* (an initiative of the Child Poverty Action Group https://cpag.org.uk/cost-of-the-school-day, accessed on 11 April 2023) to raise awareness of how financial pressures on families can be mitigated through changes to the school's policies and practice. The school had drawn on Pupil Equity Funding to bring in a consultant to set up a welfare programme for parents. Parents were consulted regarding the type of support they required, and the programme of in-person and online events was tailored around this. Initially, specific parents of CYP considered to be vulnerable within the school were targeted. It was acknowledged that there could be potential for stigmatisation and labelling, but it was argued that the programme was seen as a natural extension to the approaches adopted by the school to support vulnerable families during lockdown. Subsequently, the programme was extended as an open invitation to all parents with recordings of the sessions being placed on the school's website. The initiative had been positively evaluated by the parent council and parent body.

3.3. School Ethos, Climate, Connectedness, and Sense of Belonging

As has been identified through the international literature, the strictures associated with the pandemic disrupted relationships between people and their sense of connectedness towards each other. Less attention has been devoted to the impact on the sense of belonging that people feel regarding the school community amid such disruption. A key imperative for schools, therefore, for all three participants, was to focus on building relationships, creating a positive school ethos and climate for learning, and reaching out within and beyond the school to build a sense of community.

3.3.1. School Ethos and Climate for Learning

Creating a Positive and Emotionally Safe Environment

Many of the actions previously under discussion contributed towards creating a positive ethos and emotionally safe environment for all members of the school community. Adopting a nurturing approach was important to SM: " … we now understand the importance of wellbeing and looking after each other, and having that nurturing approach, I think, has certainly been something that's been born from the pandemic". SD talked about the need to be self-aware and empathetic in her dealings with staff, and the importance of being approachable and building trust, providing a safe space where people can talk honestly and openly. SL reflected that her experience of leading during the pandemic had led to a more empathetic approach in working with families whose children had poor attendance in the recovery phase, stressing a partnership approach.

Building Relationships, Connectedness, and Community

It has already been noted that pupils, in general, had been more subdued on return from lockdown and had difficulty in interacting with peers and teachers. A key imperative for senior leaders, therefore, was to build relationships within and beyond the school community. SD stressed the importance of CYP interacting face-to-face. She considered that the school had been largely successful in what it had set out to achieve. Key to this was a focus on relationships across the school community. The school had very good relationships with families, particularly for those children who struggle to attend school. SM, likewise, considered building relationships with families and pupils as essential to offering effective targeted support.

Voice and Participation

Across all three schools, efforts were made to ensure that pupils, staff, and parents had a voice and were able to contribute to school activities. This was particularly evident in the participation of pupils in the mental health and wellbeing event described by SM, where pupils not only played a part in organising the event but had worked alongside charities in the delivery of it. In SD's school, senior pupils played a key role in the delivery of LIAM, acting as peer mentors for younger pupils. In SM's school, parents played a prominent role in developing programmes to support vulnerable families.

3.4. Inclusive Practice

Much of what has been discussed could be construed as inclusive practice—practice that does not merely focus on the needs of some, but on the whole school community, whilst ensuring a lack of discrimination and ensuring that all can thrive. Schools adopted a wide range of approaches—some individualised and targeted, and others universal in nature. Investing in the professional development of staff to raise awareness of the circumstances of families and develop knowledge, understanding, and expertise across a wide range of areas; developing inclusive systems and structures; sourcing funding and targeting resources effectively; forging and developing partnerships; directing CYP and families to sources of support; and investing in the wellbeing of the school community all play a part in creating inclusive, caring, and compassionate communities.

3.5. Leadership in Times of Crisis

This discussion draws on the insights gained about the participants' leadership deriving from their experience of leading in a time of crisis but also their simultaneous participation in the IH programme.

3.5.1. Towards More Democratic Forms of Leadership

A common theme across all three participants was an awareness of the need to move away from hierarchical understandings of leadership to more democratic forms. This had led SL to reframe her understanding of leadership from " ... all powerful people who had all the answers, who made all the decisions" to a view of headship concerned with distribution of leadership, empowerment, and developing leadership capabilities in others. Likewise, SM had become aware of the need to adopt a more distributive approach, avoiding a tendency to micromanage, and all three participants demonstrated a people-orientated, collaborative, and participative approach.

3.5.2. The Need for a Responsive and Adaptive Response

A key insight has been the need to be creative, responsive, flexible, and adopt a problem-solving approach when responding to a rapidly changing and unpredictable landscape. SL reflected on instances where the timetable had changed on multiple occasions in a short timeframe as the school sought to address announcements from the Scottish Government, in the process meeting requirements for social distancing, necessitating risk assessments on each occasion. She had come to an understanding of the need to pace change effectively, being responsive to changing circumstances and to the capacity of the staff at any specific point—"You could push full steam ahead on your own, but you would be on your own".

3.5.3. Empowering Others and Building Capacity

Working with Others and Managing Change

Across the participants, building capacity in the system through developing the leadership capacities of others, drawing appropriately on the talents and abilities of others, empowering staff who may be disillusioned, adopting a coaching and mentoring approach, and building strong teams were important aspects of steering their schools through this tumultuous time.

SD spoke about the need to be able to guide, support, and challenge when working with staff. She strongly advocated for a coaching and mentoring approach, understanding the importance of listening to staff and encouraging them to come up with their own solutions. She recognised the importance of sharing knowledge and understanding with staff in order to build leadership capacity in them, empowering them to demonstrate their skills. She talked about the responsibility of keeping up to date with education policy and the ability to interpret and implement it, something that she had not had time to think about before beginning the course.

The Role of the Headteacher as Community Representative

SM had learned that leading a school is a team approach that reaches across the whole school community. It is bigger than the individual person and extends beyond the school to its wider community. The accounts from all three participants of their experiences during and in the aftermath of lockdown highlight the important role of senior leaders as leaders of their communities, with the community looking to them for leadership, guidance, and support.

4. Discussion

4.1. A Shift in Focus as Schools Traverse the Recovery Phase

As schools in the UK have gradually emerged from the privations of lockdowns, there has been a significant shift in focus, although some issues have remained constant. In the recovery phase, a range of issues has come to the fore, key amongst which are school attendance, disengagement from learning, even, as has been discussed, in previously well-motivated CYP, and a concomitant deterioration in behaviour, as well as heightened concerns around the wellbeing of the school community.

4.1.1. School Attendance, Disengagement from Learning, and Behavioural Issues

The UN describes education as being "the basic building block of every society. It is the single best investment countries can make to build prosperous, healthy, and equitable societies" [41]. Yet, our participants identified persistent absence from school as being a significant problem in the recovery period. In keeping with the findings of the Co-Space longitudinal study in England [13], specific groups of CYP were found to be more at risk of poorer behavioural, emotional, and attentional outcomes, which are still in evidence three years beyond the initial lockdown, affecting their motivation to learn. This is symptomatic of a deeply rooted problem and of a disconnect from the school itself—a fracturing of the sense of belonging that is central to inclusion—"that sense of being somewhere you can feel confident that you will fit in and feel safe in your identity" [42] (p. 4), hence the efforts of our participants to build community.

In January 2023, the UK Parliament intimated that it was launching an enquiry into persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils [43], highlighting that in the autumn of 2021 around a quarter of all pupils aged 5–15 were either persistently (an attendance rate of ≤90%) or severely (≤50%) absent from school, 818,000 of whom were persistently absent for reasons other than illness. In an attendance audit, drawing on the voices of CYP themselves, the Children's Commissioner for England established that it was not a lack of a desire to learn that lay at the heart of the problem, but a lack of support [44]. The issues raised by our participants were reflected within this audit (e.g., children who experience anxiety finding learning at home more conducive).

In Scotland, it has been established that school absence (no matter its provenance) is detrimental to attainment in national examinations in the senior phase of schooling [45]. The relationship between poorer attendance and socioeconomic-status is also well-established [46], but the authors found that family-related, rather than school-related, variables were more significant in impacting on absence from school, which implies that the problem cannot be addressed through education policy alone.

4.1.2. Rising to the Challenge of Meeting Heightened Levels of Need

All three participants drew attention to heightened levels of need, particularly relating to mental health and wellbeing, whether in respect of pupils, staff, or families, with the cost-of-living crisis in the UK now adding greater pressure. As intimated by UNICEF, "Children are not the face of this pandemic. But they risk being among its biggest victims, as children's lives are nonetheless being changed in profound ways" [47]. Our participants and their schools had drawn on their enhanced skills and understanding of what digital technologies can afford to identify the scale and nature of need and on an imaginative range of initiatives to address the issue, supported by local authority policies and resources, funding streams from the Scottish Attainment Challenge and the counselling service offered to all secondary schools in Scotland.

However, as identified through their accounts, there can be tensions, such as the potential for stigmatisation and labelling when targeted approaches are adopted, whether for CYP, staff, or parents. It could be argued that some of the measures taken to support pupil need could be regarded as exclusive, rather than inclusive, in that they necessitate the removal of the pupil from the mainstream class (e.g., the nurture group or counselling session; in the case of SM, the wellbeing area) and/or forms of alternative provision. Slee [23,24], Mowat [1] and Riley [42] draw attention to scenarios where what has been euphemistically called the "inclusion room" (or other similar names) has been experienced by the YP as 'anything but.' Honkasilta [26] refers to exclusion as both a "social practice" (in which the pupil is excluded from the day-to-day interactions of the classroom) and a "discourse practice" (which acts to prevent the establishment of an environment that promotes diversity and acceptance of others and self). He stresses the importance of the nature of interaction between members of the school community as being at the heart of inclusion in education, recognising that needs take a variety of forms, such as the need for a sense of affinity and belonging, key themes which have emerged in this study.

Slee [23] makes the case that the very presence of special education or forms of it places boundaries around inclusion, reflecting "hierarchies of belonging and exclusion" (pp. 2–3). However, I would argue that a very strong narrative emerges from the accounts of all three participants of a concern for the wellbeing of all CYP and their families, and for a need to find practical solutions to highly intractable problems working within the constraints of the system. This does not mean that we should not be arguing strongly for a transformation of the system which removes barriers to participation and values the inherent worth of each and every child. Florian [25] argues for a focus on embracing the diversity of learners as being a key aspect of inclusion in education.

5. Conclusions

So, what inferences can be drawn from the approach of these aspiring headteachers as they led their school communities during the recovery phase, and how does this inform the future development of headship preparation programmes in the UK and beyond, such that they promote equitable, inclusive, and compassionate practice?

5.1. Lessons for Leading in Times of Crisis

Referring back to the discussions of leading in times of crisis, the strategies adopted by our three participants (c.c. p. 4 of this article) largely mirror those identified by Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou [27]. The recommendations for responsive, adaptive, and distributive forms of leadership [27,30,31,33] are borne out in the accounts of the participants who all embraced democratic and collaborative forms of leadership, sensitive to context. Likewise, there is a need for leadership founded on strong moral principles [31], with a focus on equity and social justice [10,32,34], and the building of relational trust and care for the school community [27,30–33], all of which were amply demonstrated through the range of initiatives which reached out to support vulnerable families and CYP and sought to build community.

Mitchell et al. [32] highlight the pivotal role of the empowered headteacher as a lead learner within the school who builds and supports "collaborative professional learning cultures that recognise context and community and are built on shared values and understandings of social justice" (p. 195). According to the authors, such a culture lies at the heart of "creating and sustaining teacher development within which teachers are valued, respected and supported as professionals" (p. 198). The accounts of the three participants demonstrate their understanding of their role in this regard.

Key themes within the literature include the opportunity the pandemic provides to re-imagine schooling, for transformational change at a systems and local level and for empowerment of the school community [10,28,29,32,33]. There were many examples provided by our participants in which the pandemic had acted as a catalyst for change, such as the adoption of a more empathetic partnership approach with parents (SL) and of opportunities for pupils, staff, and parents to shape policy and practice. Participation in the IH programme and leading through the pandemic had shaped the identity of our prospective headteachers such that they saw their role in a much more expansive way—as being representatives of and advocates for their communities, not just solely concerned with the education of CYP, recognising that wellbeing and inclusive practice lie at the heart of the school.

5.2. Implications for Headship Preparation Programmes

No headship preparation programme can ever fully prepare prospective headteachers to lead in the unprecedented set of circumstances (in Western countries) brought about by the pandemic, and the literature has little to offer regarding how educational leadership programmes can prepare school leaders to cope with the emotional labour associated with leading in high-accountability and high-stress 'triage-like' conditions with very little guidance to mitigate the challenges faced [48] (p. 2). Harris and Jones [30] attest that school leadership practices are unlikely to ever be the same, arguing that most existing leadership preparation programmes will need a radical rethink to remain relevant [1]. However, whilst this study does not constitute an evaluation of the Into Headship programme per se, the accounts of all three participants indicate that they had found worth and value in the programme, which provided them with the resilience to cope to the best of their abilities in supporting their school communities.

Whitaker and Kniffin [49] make the case for crisis as pedagogy, drawing on the lived experience of students of the pandemic to make real and bring to life abstract concepts within the field of leadership education, such as managing change, conflict management, and communication. Schechter, Da'as, and Qadach [33] recommend that leadership education programmes should focus on how social, national, and economic contexts shape leadership responses. Through the multiple opportunities provided for students to share their experiences of leading through the pandemic and through the focus on heightening their understanding of the impact of the pandemic on children and families through engagement with a wide range of literature (international, national and third-sector reports and surveys) on the topic, they were able to develop their understanding of the context in which they were leading.

Key imperatives for headship preparation programmes to emerge from the narratives of our participants are a focus on strategic leadership; vision and values; leadership for equity and social justice, inclusion, and children's rights; democratic and collaborative forms of leadership; responsive, adaptive, emotionally attuned and compassionate leadership; the challenges and ethical dilemmas of leadership; and building community and partnership-working.

However, what is required is a much more ambitious endeavour—a reimagining of schooling at a systems level and recognition of the interdependence of public policy at global, national, and local levels across a range of realms—social, education, fiscal, housing etc.—to address inequalities in society. To return to the question posed by UNICEF in the introduction to this paper, as we stand at the crossroads it is hoped that, through adopting such approaches, we will follow the right path to creating truly equitable, inclusive, and compassionate school communities.

6. Limitations

It is recognised that this account can only provide a snapshot in time which may illuminate the issues for others in similar circumstances but cannot be held to be generalisable across all contexts. It constitutes the initial analysis and a subset of the data, limited to the secondary sector and interviews only.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

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Appendix A

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Appendix A.1. Schedule for Phase 2 Interviews

Preliminary Questions

Can you remind me please of the following:

I. The sector you are working in;
II. The SIMD status of the school;
III. Your role within the school?

Question 1
Participants provided with their responses to the Phase 1 survey, completed in June 2020, prior to interview.

As schools emerged from the initial lockdown in spring/early summer 2020, what challenges did you anticipate that they would face in supporting their school communities, particularly regarding socio-emotional wellbeing?
How close was this to the reality of what you have experienced over the period when schools have gradually been phasing back to more normal practice?

Prompts
Was there anything that was less problematic than you had anticipated?
Were there other things that you had not anticipated that presented as a challenge?

Probes
Why do you think this was the case?

Question 2a
In the period since schools have been phasing back, what measures have you put in place to support pupil wellbeing?
What aspects do you consider have been more effective?
What aspects do you consider have been less effective?

Question 2b
In the period since schools have been phasing back, what measures have you put in place to support staff wellbeing?

What aspects do you consider have been more effective?
What aspects do you consider have been less effective?

Question 2c
In the period since schools have been phasing back, what measures have you put in place to support pupils who are more vulnerable (e.g., those living in poverty/with Additional Support Needs and/or care experienced), including engagement with families?

What aspects do you consider have been more effective?
What aspects do you consider have been less effective?

Probes for Questions 2a–c
How do you know?
Why is this the case?
What could have made a difference?

Question 3a
What lessons do you consider can be learned from the pandemic in terms of policy and practice in schools?
Probes
What would you now do differently?
Are there aspects of policy or practice during lockdown or in the period when schools were phasing back that you would retain or build upon?
Are there aspects of policy or practice prior to lockdown which you would now discard?

Question 3b
What have you learned about your own leadership as a prospective/acting/substantive headteacher arising from your leadership during the pandemic and from your participation within the programme?
Probes
What would you now do differently and why?
How will it inform your future practice?

Appendix A.2. Excerpt from Initial Analysis of Transcript for SM

Interview Transcript (extract from)

Secondary Sector
Key

Q	Question
S	Speaker (Interviewer/Respondent)
Id	Identifier for responses from respondent

Interviewer: JM
Respondent: SM Depute Headteacher

Table A1. Excerpt from initial analysis of transcript for SM.

Q	S	Id	Transcript	Descriptive Comments	Cross-Ref [1]
1	I		*Was there anything that, any things that you hadn't anticipated would be difficult proved to be so? Any things that you thought would be smooth that weren't as smooth as you'd hoped, particularly in terms of pupil, well not just pupil wellbeing, but the wellbeing of the school community as a whole?*		
	R	SM 14	Yeah, yeah. I feel that what kind of came as a surprise to us was the level of flatness among students. The, I suppose we all felt they were very quiet when they came back. We felt that they had real difficulties coming back into a situation where they're able to interact with each other and interact with the teacher in a situation where they're all in the one room together. That was certainly reported back to us by staff and also some of our observations were that you'd walk into classrooms and everyone was very, very quiet and some were quite insular, and we found that that's taken a bit of time to maybe work through. We've found that some students have really taken a hit in terms of their own resilience and their own ability to be able to have confidence in their own abilities. We've recently undertaken a prelim assessment opportunity for S4s and they haven't really performed very well in that exercise at all and I'm asking staff to maybe track back and see if there's any situations in their own, their own teaching, or has there been pockets of the curriculum that has been missed or not covered appropriately because these young students have been affected in a particular way but we did certainly feel that the ability for them to interact with each other was much more difficult, I think.	Whilst some of the issues discussed had been anticipated, it had not been expected that pupils, in general, would be very subdued, and some quite insular. It was evident that they were experiencing difficulties in interacting with each other and with teachers and it has taken time to resolve this. The impact of the pandemic and associated lockdowns has had an effect on the resilience of some YP and on their sense of self-efficacy. S4 did not perform as well as might have normally been expected in Prelims, and the school has examined through individual pupil tracking and the delivery of the curriculum why this might have been the case. However, the ability of students to interact with each other and with the teacher was considered to be an important factor.	
	I		So what you're saying is that maybe, you know, some might just attribute that to sort of gaps in learning but what you're saying, it's more than that, it's, you know, children who are subdued . . .		

[1] Responses which related to questions other than the question posed were noted in this column.

Appendix A.3. Extract from Summary of Interview with SM and Key Messages

Derived directly from descriptive comments (see Appendix A.2). Summary sent to participants for verification.

Question 1

As schools emerged from the initial lockdown in spring 2020, what challenges did you anticipate that they would face in supporting their school communities, particularly regarding socio-emotional wellbeing?
How close was this to the reality of what you have experienced over the period when schools have gradually been phasing back to more normal practice?

The school felt well-prepared in that it had already established robust tracking and risk-assessment systems for pupils prior to the pandemic. However, there was uncertainty regarding how long the situation would last and whether there would be lockdowns again. The robust tracking systems along with the ability to maintain contact with families and young people (YP), particularly the most vulnerable, enabled the school to maintain the level of support. Whilst concerns about attainment and lost learning generally came to the forefront, the school built on the positives arising from engagement with digital technologies to support learning and the growing confidence of staff in using them, resulting in some learners being in a good position to resume learning within the school environment post-lockdown. However, significant problems began to emerge for YP relating to well-being, arising from the lack of socialisation during lockdown, ongoing health problems and/or bereavement in the close and/or extended family, leading to disengagement from school. The school initially adopted a targeted approach to meeting pupil need, drawing on PEF and other measures, but this became too labour- and resource-intensive. The school then explored universal supports for pupils and families, looking to access supports beyond the school setting. This then led to a broader focus on programmes within the school and the curriculum in terms of whether these are meeting the needs of pupils and relevant to the wider issues that YP are experiencing in their daily lives, such as health and poverty.

Etc.

Key Findings SM (extract from 25 key findings)

1. The SIMD is not a true representation of need and the model of funding for the SAC does not take account of the hidden poverty experienced by some families, meaning that resources were stretched within the school to meet the needs of YP living in poverty.
2. Having robust tracking processes and communication systems in place prior to the pandemic enabled the school to support its community more effectively during lockdown and in the period of recovery.

The Wellbeing of Pupils

3. The lack of socialisation during lockdown, coupled with ongoing health issues and the impact of bereavement for some YP, had an enduring effect on the capacity of YP to interact with peers and teachers and on their confidence and sense of self-efficacy, impacting on classroom dynamics and, ultimately, learning.
4. The initial focus on targeted support for pupils in need proved to be unsustainable and the school turned its attention to universal approaches, including an examination of the curriculum and its delivery.

Etc.

The Wellbeing of Staff

5. The mental health of staff has become an issue of increasing concern. Stressors arising from the impact of the pandemic and additional work created by it, the cost-of-living crisis and the pressures of work put staff at greater risk of experiencing mental health issues. There are particular pressures in the spring term leading up to the examination period.
6. The school recognises that insufficient attention has been devoted to the issue and intends to draw on its network of partner organisations to offer training to staff. The school offers a range of wellbeing activities for staff and has a dedicated page on its website directing staff to local authority and other sources of support.

Engagement with Families (particularly those of YP considered to be more vulnerable)

7. The school is aware of the financial pressures on families and has examined its practice. A consultant has been appointed. Following consultation with parents, a wellbeing programme has been established targeted towards vulnerable families but further extended by an open invitation to all families. The programme is seen as a natural extension of the support that was put in place for more vulnerable families during lockdown. It has been positively evaluated by the parent council and parent body. A webpage is also directed towards supporting families and directing them towards resources.
8. The school has appointed a family liaison officer, drawing on PEF, and is putting in place a strategy for communicating more effectively with families, recognising that this is an area that needs to be strengthened. It is considered that these measures will relieve pressure on staff whilst providing additional support to those families with whom the school communicated regularly during lockdown.

Etc.

Key Lessons Learned for Policy and Practice in Schools

9. Wellbeing for all members of the school community lies at the heart of the school and its business. Without good wellbeing, the goals of the school cannot be achieved.
10. An understanding of the school as being the hub of and being visible within the community leading to an understanding of headship as being community-based.

Etc.

Key Lessons Learned about Leadership as a Prospective Headteacher

11. Recognition of the role as being primarily about leading through and developing the leadership capacities of others.
12. Learning to build strong teams and lead them effectively, providing opportunities for people to take responsibility whilst being held accountable for their actions.

Etc.

Appendix A.4. Illustration of the Coding Process to Generate Descriptive Codes for Phase 2 of the Study

Question 2a

In the period since schools have been phasing back, what measures have you put in place to support pupil wellbeing?

What aspects do you consider have been more effective? (Ef)

What aspects do you consider have been less effective? (In)

Table A2. Illustration of the coding process to generate descriptive codes for Phase 2 of the study.

			Key Themes from Phase 1 of the Study				
			Quality Learning	The mental health and wellbeing of the school community	School ethos, climate, sense of belonging, connectedness and community	Inclusive Practice	School Leadership
Id	Descriptive Comments	Ef/In	Descriptive Codes				
SD 38	COVID has raised awareness of the possibilities of digital learning. Information has been gathered through questionnaires about the wellbeing of pupils and their attitudes towards returning to school. From this, the school has been able to identify pupils in need of additional support and whose progress needs to be monitored more rigorously.	Ef	Drawing on data from questionnaires to identify pupils who require more rigorous monitoring	Drawing on data from questionnaires to ascertain pupils' wellbeing and attitudes about returning to school		Drawing on data from questionnaires to identify pupils in need of additional support	Using data effectively to support pupil wellbeing and learning

Appendix A.5. Illustration of Analytical and Descriptive Coding for Theme 1–Quality Learning

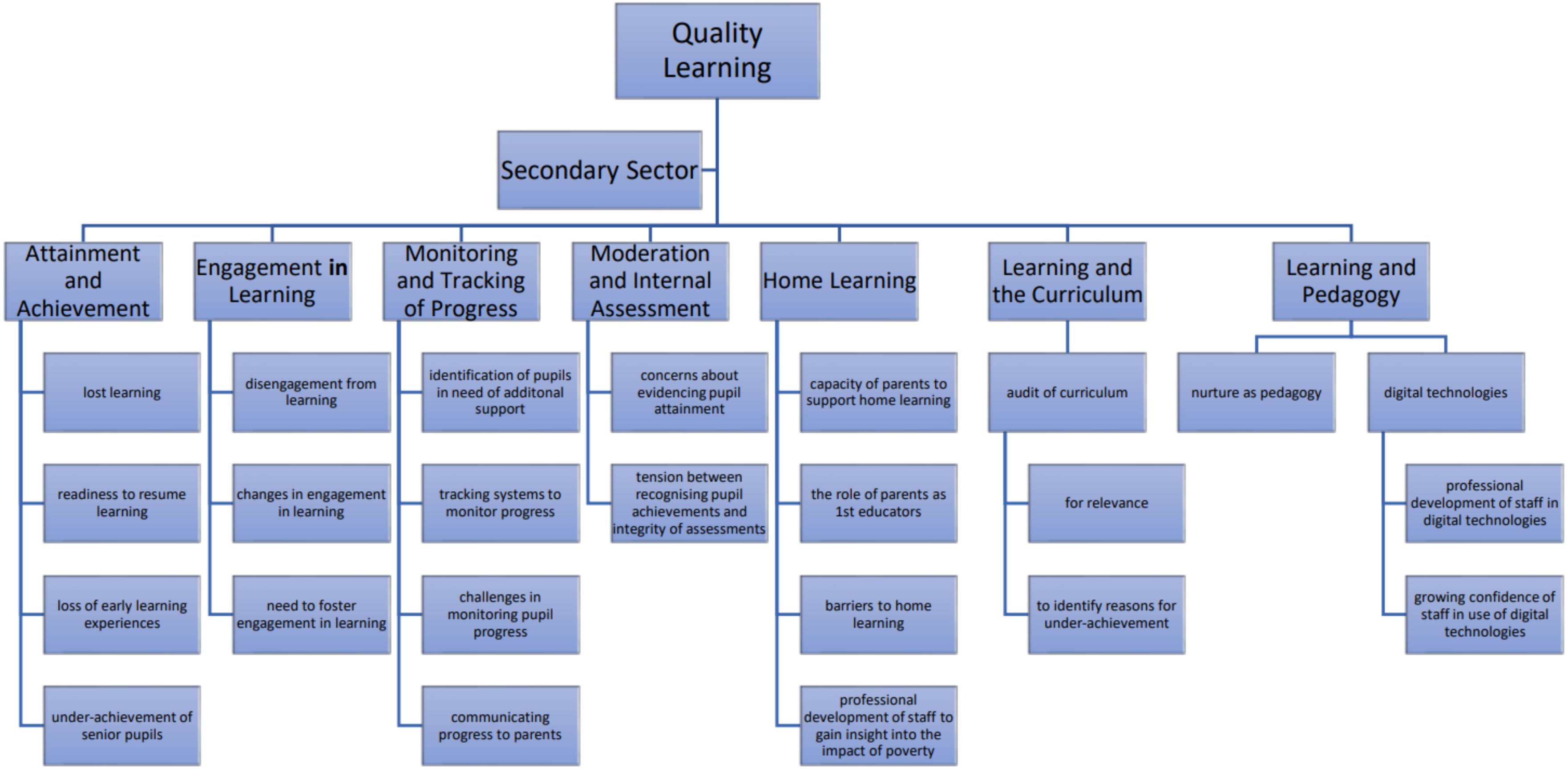

Figure A1. Illustration of analytical and descriptive coding for Theme 1–Quality Learning.

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